

TEACHING AS A MEANS OF PARTICIPATING IN A MOVEMENT FOR SOCIAL
CHANGE: CRITICAL CARE IN PRACTICE

BY

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DISSERTATION

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Abstract

In our current educational climate where high-stakes, standardized testing is a top priority, conversations around teaching and learning are often reduced to which practices will raise student test scores. This is especially true in many schools deemed failing under current education policy guidelines, and often students of color and poor students attend those “failing” schools. In the schools deemed failing, student compliance is emphasized and often teacher-student relationships or any other conversations about how schools should serve students are eliminated or pushed to the periphery.

This dissertation looks into those peripheral issues of relationships between students and teachers. The central questions raised here are: how are relationships between students and teachers constructed in the classroom and how important are those relationships to the students and teachers involved? Qualitative, ethnographic methods were used in this 4-month study to observe in one 10th grade US History teacher’s classroom as well as interviews with the focal teacher, students, and other school staff in order to gain insight into their experiences and perspectives situated in the context of this particular research site.

My focal teacher, Kurian Joseph, created and enacted a curriculum that was critical, relevant to students’ lived experiences, and participatory. This curriculum emerged out of Kurian’s personal beliefs that his purpose was to help give his students the tools so they could be the ones to transform an oppressive society. Kurian, along with the founding teachers of the school, arrived at teaching from an activist background, with a critical consciousness that informed his beliefs about teaching as well as his everyday interactions with his students. Students told me they felt as though Kurian was a teacher who understood where they came from, which he achieved through the framing of his curriculum and valuing students’

experiences. However, tensions around authority and student engagement still existed in the school. Kurian, along with other teachers in the school, had to negotiate the use of their authority in the classroom in order to achieve a balance between being respected as the authority (by students and administrators) and being “laid back” (something the students I interviewed placed a high value on).

This research sheds light on how relationships can be constructed that acknowledge the socio-political realities of our students’ lives (Rolon-Dow, 2005; Valenzuela, 1999). This research argues that critical consciousness is key in terms of teachers understanding students’ lives in a way that is not paternalistic or deficit-oriented. Despite the existence of a relevant curriculum and caring teachers, not all students felt connected to school, however. Even the most relevant and participatory curriculum is not enacted in a vacuum—students and teachers are still negotiating with wider systems (e.g., school and society), and those systems are still sites where power and inequality are reproduced more often than they are disrupted.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

A class of 8th graders stand in line with coats and bookbags. Some students are talking and playing. It is 2:45. There is just one hour left in the school day, one class before they get to go home. The art teacher stands at the head of the line demanding the students be absolutely quiet and reminds them they are not allowed inside the classroom until the talking and playing stop. In the back of the line a girl loudly exhales and steps away from the line, seemingly annoyed with the teacher's reminder. Two boys playfully push each other. The art teacher continues to keep the students standing in a line, and continues to remind them that art class will not start until they are quiet. The art teacher reminds one of the boys in the class that she won't tolerate any more disrespectful behavior, he responds by rolling his eyes and muttering something unintelligible; the teacher interprets that as a sign of disrespect. She removes him from the line and tells him she is going to write him up. He angrily responds "I don't care!"

Background and Purpose

This vignette illustrates all too common teacher-student interactions in many schools. There is a strained relationship between the art teacher and many of the 8th grade students. The primary focus is on compliance to authority. Students' frustration, perceived refusal to comply, and attempt to maintain autonomy are evident. The administration of the school in which the teacher works places a high value on student compliance, so the teacher feels as though she is merely enforcing school rules. When she tells the students they won't be able to enter the art room until they are quiet, many of the students talk more because they don't want to go to art

anyway. The teacher and many of the students have different agendas—which are in this moment in direct conflict.

The educational climate we exist in today is concerned with measurable outcomes—mainly standardized test scores. In schools that are deemed to be failing (such as the one described above), there is little discussion about anything other than what will “move students forward.” This often fosters an environment like the one described in the opening vignette, where student compliance is highly valued and strictly enforced. As school and district administration attempt to strictly regiment the instructional day, many teachers feel a lack of time and autonomy, and many students experience boredom, frustration, and alienation (Bartolomé, 1994; Lee, 1999; Nieto, 2003; Valenzuela, 1999).

This study, then, looks at a context in which the environment feels different from that described above. Frustrated by working in places where attempts at forcing compliance comprised the primary way teachers interacted with students, I wanted to investigate what it could possibly look like to be in a classroom where teachers did care about building relationships with students and engaging them in an exploration of a relevant curriculum. I also wanted to know in what ways these relationships mattered to the teachers and students involved, if they mattered at all.

As a classroom teacher, I have participated in “data meetings” where numbers are discussed as if they are not even attached to children. I have walked in school hallways where bulletin boards display students’ test scores in an odd attempt to motivate students. I taught in Atlanta Public Schools (APS) during the years the now infamous cheating scandal occurred, and it is easy to see why cheating was so rampant. We had annual celebrations that every APS teacher was mandated to attend. The staff at the schools that hit all of their growth targets got to

sit on the floor of the Georgia Dome, and those schools who did not were shamed by being relegated to the bleachers. All of these examples illustrate the way students are discussed solely in terms of how they perform on tests, their intellectualism reduced to that which is easily measured (e.g., standardized test scores). As Behrent (2009) explained,

Testing forces us to think about people as numbers. “Data” has become the word of the day. Professional development for English teachers in my school no longer involves discussion of literature; instead we pour over data in search of ways to boost our students’ test scores. (p. 242)

When students are reduced to numbers, the discussion on teaching follows suit. There is no room for discussion on what value the numbers have in the first place or how those numbers translate (or don’t) to meaningful learning. Bartolomé (1994) explained,

As such, the solution to the problem of academic underachievement tends to be constructed in primarily methodological and mechanistic terms . . . the solution to the current underachievement of students from subordinated cultures is often reduced to finding the “right” teaching methods, strategies, or prepackaged curricula. (pp. 173-174).

In one of my years as an 8th grade teacher there was a huge focus on fluency testing in reading. We tracked weekly data on fluency tests and used that to measure whether or not students were making improvement in reading overall. I remember being extremely frustrated when our school psychologist asked about one of my students, an African American male. Why wasn’t he making progress (in fluency)? Our discussion was solely about why he hadn’t improved, as if there were easy answers as to why he wasn’t responding to this prepackaged intervention. I wanted to yell in frustration that his lack of improvement might have been because the intervention was boring and irrelevant, or because he had been having a hard time

with his parents' separation, or because he didn't feel connected to school, but there was no space for discussion of these more complex issues in this data meeting. As Bartolomé eloquently argued, "[I]t is erroneous to assume that blind replication of instructional programs . . . will guarantee successful student learning, especially when we are discussing populations that historically have been mistreated and miseducated by the schools" (p. 174).

This policy context is important because teacher-student relationships are not easily measured and therefore not of primary concern to many participants in the national conversation on educational reform. I am arguing that the kind of educational achievement policymakers and their supporters claim to value cannot happen without taking teacher-student relationships into account. I am also arguing that easily measurable outcomes are not the only thing that matters in education. We have decided that a "good" education is measured only by standardized test performance, but what about what matters to the students? What about things like students feeling supported in and connected to school? What about ways that students and teachers can impact each other's lives that cannot be measured with a test?

Teaching is about more than delivering content to students. Effective teachers also demonstrate caring, believe in their students' abilities to learn, purposefully build relationships with students, learn about their students' lives outside of school, and show love and respect (Fisher, 2007; Foster, 1997; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Nieto, 2003, 2010). I think it is a somewhat revolutionary stance to foreground these things as an important part of teaching, but it is necessary.

Ladson-Billings (1995), in her research on the practices of eight exemplary teachers, talked about teachers demonstrating caring as more than being "demonstrative and affectionate toward the students," but rather as showing concern for students and their families and

communities (p. 474). Nieto (2003) collected stories from teachers in urban schools as a way to examine the question “What keeps teachers going?” Nieto questioned, among other things, what accounted for differences between students in the same school district. Students who dropped out of school stated, “[T]he one factor that might have prevented them from doing so was an adult in the school who knew them well and cared for them” (Nieto, 2003, p. 2). Valenzuela (1999), on the basis of her ethnographic study in a Texas high school, argued, “The feeling that ‘no one cares’ is pervasive—and corrosive. Real learning is difficult to sustain in an atmosphere rife with mistrust” (p. 7). This kind of caring goes beyond simply being nice to students; caring means an investment in students’ lives as they envision them. And this is not always easy. When I started teaching, as much as I am ashamed to admit, I had the idea that if students didn’t care then well, I couldn’t care *for* them. Instead, I learned that “sometimes teachers have to carry this vision for students until they are able to carry it for themselves” (Fisher, 2007, p. 90). This kind of caring requires a lot of energy. I would argue that this is a large part of the work of teaching.

Significance of the Study

This is an ethnographic study of a high school, focusing on two class periods of a 10th grade United States History class (i.e., two different sections of one class). My intention is to describe the ways Mr. Kurian Joseph¹ (my focal teacher) constructs relationships with his students in daily interactions and in enacting the curriculum. There is a large body of research arguing for the importance of building relationships and engaging students in a relevant curriculum, but less research that examines what that looks like in the classroom. I am approaching this research from the vantage point that how students are treated in schools is at least as important as any discussion of “academic achievement.” My study is framed by the following questions:

¹ All names are pseudonyms, including all place names aside from the city of Chicago.

1. How are relationships between teachers and students constructed?
2. What are teachers' beliefs on the role of teacher-student relationships in teaching?
3. How do institutional mandates figure into teachers' construction of teacher-student relationships?
4. How do students view teacher-student relationships?

We are inundated with messages that teachers and kids are the things that most need to be fixed in education. One response to this perceived problem of poor teaching is to provide increasingly regulated curriculum. In a discussion with my most recent principal I expressed frustration at district-level administrators coming in my classroom under the assumption that I don't know what I'm doing. Her response was that if only 40 percent of the students are "proficient" then the assumption is that only 40 percent of the teachers are proficient. This very narrow idea about what good teaching is and how it is measured is something I am hoping to push back on. Along with other researchers, I do not want to think about good teaching as solely measured by standardized test scores, nor do I think the only valuable things young people do in school show up on test scores (Bartolomé, 1994; Behrent, 2009; Fisher, 2007; Foster, 1997; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Lee, 1999; Nieto, 2003, 2010; Valenzuela, 1999).

Like Deborah Meier (1995), I believe teacher education should have a large focus on habits of mind for pre-service teachers. Learning experiences in teacher education programs should have a heavy focus on teacher identity, understanding the macro-level issues undergirding education (e.g., racism and poverty), and equipping pre-service teachers with the ability to critique and push back against deficit views of students and communities. I am hoping to make a case for teaching pre-service teachers about the importance of organic, caring relationships with their students. I am not interested in providing a recipe (e.g., THIS is the way to develop

relationships with students!), but rather in opening up the discussion of what developing relationships looks like in different classroom contexts as well as why it is important.

I'm hoping my project will contribute to the discussion of what good teaching is and looks like. My purpose is also to explore the valuable things that happen in classrooms that are not directly reflected in test data. Among these things are the ways teachers work to connect to their students' lives, affirm students' identities, cultures, and lived experiences, and work to create a classroom culture that respects and values students.

Organization of Chapters

In Chapter 2, I review the relevant literature. I discuss the scholarship on caring theory and critical race theory (CRT), as well as use CRT to critique traditional caring theory. I also describe Freire's (1970) ideas about liberatory pedagogy and discuss how it connects to Kurian Joseph's classroom. I then review the ethnographic research on caring and student-teacher relationships. Next, is an overview of the research on culturally responsive pedagogy, with an explanation of how culturally sustaining pedagogy has tried to provide a new way to look at teacher practices that hope to sustain students' cultures. Finally, I discuss the research on classrooms as dialogic spaces and conclude with a review of the research on power and discipline in schools. The literature reviewed in Chapter 2 outlines the research done in areas that emerged as prevalent in my findings chapters.

Chapter 3 explains the methodology I used for exploring the construction of teacher-student relationships at Mandela High School. I introduce the school and the community as well as my focal participants and my focal classrooms. I will review in detail my data collection and data analysis procedures. Chapter 3 concludes with a description of my own role at the site. My

role is somewhat complex due to my relationship to the school community and my dual identity as a teacher/researcher.

In Chapter 4, I describe the context of my research site in detail. I discuss the history of Mandela High School along with that of the surrounding community. I focus particularly on the history of activism around affordable housing, programs for youth, and quality education activism that I also participated in. I then discuss in detail about Kurian's (my focal teacher) background and how he came to be a teacher. I argue in Chapter 4 that Kurian, along with the founding teachers of Mandela, all arrived at teaching as a profession with a critical consciousness already in place. This critical consciousness informs their teaching, including the way Kurian designed his curriculum as well as his daily interactions with students.

In Chapter 5, I explore the way Kurian Joseph connected with his students through his curriculum. I discuss Kurian's beliefs about his curriculum and how that curriculum fits in with his philosophy of education. I provide an overview of his written curriculum. Then I discuss how Kurian created space for student voices in ways that were built into his daily structure and ways that were flexible and responsive. I argue in this chapter that Kurian's daily interactions with his students were an enactment of critical care—a kind of care that takes into account his students' political and social realities.

In Chapter 6, I tease out the complexities inherent in schooling. I describe tensions that existed around issues of power and authority and the ways Kurian and other staff and students at Mandela talked about teachers mitigating those power differences (namely through humor and being open with students). I then explain students' perspectives on the link between their grades and their relationships with their teachers. I conclude this chapter with a discussion of the daily frustrations of teaching, in terms of what I noticed in Kurian's classroom during my observations

and what the teachers described to me. I argue that even in this context, where the teacher was working hard to enact a relevant, engaging curriculum, there were still tensions and frustrations.

In my final chapter I return to the main arguments I have made throughout my findings chapters. Throughout this dissertation I argue that my focal teacher, along with other teachers in the school, saw his role as a teacher as a way to participate in a larger movement for social change. This then shaped the way he saw his students and his ideas about what it meant to care for students. Kurian's relationships with his students were rooted in his critical, liberatory pedagogy and his belief that students can be the ones who radically change the systemic inequalities that structure our society. These relationships are complex, however, especially considering the nature of school as an institution. I end this chapter with a discussion of the implications of this study for teaching and teacher education, as well as possible directions for further research.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

I have approached this research from a socio-cultural perspective. That is, I believe all learning is social and contextual. We don't learn things in isolation, but rather with and from others in a particular time and place. Schools are sites where all kinds of learning takes place—learning not limited to the objectives written on boards by teachers in classrooms all over the United States. I am also operating from a definition of culture as something that is dynamic, rather than thinking about it as something static that students bring with them to school (Geertz, 1973; Miller & Goodnow, 1995; Rosaldo, 1989). Like many other settings, schools are places where culture is practiced, negotiated, and enacted in different ways. None of us have our culture contained in a box—we all borrow, modify, and abandon practices as we come into contact with the world. Children are actively making meaning of their world by interacting with others and with cultural forms. They exercise agency in how they take up cultural forms and what they do with them. “Children do not just listen to music, for example; they are encouraged, discouraged or unnoticed as they participate in church service singing, morning routines involving radio airwaves, or an older sibling's sing-along sessions with a favorite radio star” (Dyson, 2003, p. 29).

Teacher-student relationships are largely mediated through language. Language is one aspect of cultural practice(s) that are enacted between individuals and groups, including in local classroom settings. The purpose of this research is to examine teacher-student relationships as situated in particular cultural contexts. Classrooms are not just spaces where teachers teach a curriculum to students. Classrooms are spaces where human beings interact with each other and participate in creating and modifying culture together. I am looking at the interactions between

teachers and students as part of the process of creating a sense of community and culture that is situated not just in the classroom context, but also in a broader socio-cultural context.

The purpose of this literature review is to situate my study in a larger body of work. My research is in conversation with caring theory and borrows the criticisms of caring theory from critical race theory. My focal teacher, Kurian Joseph, led me to using liberatory pedagogy as a way to explain his teaching philosophy and goals. I consider also ethnographic research on caring (or lack thereof) in practice. I review research that examines what culturally responsive/sustaining classrooms should look like, in addition to considering research that highlights classrooms where students are viewed as having valuable knowledge to contribute. Finally, because I came to realize issues of power and authority are inescapable in schools, I review research on discipline and power in schools.

Caring Theory

Noddings's (1984) theory on caring posits that relationships between teachers and students are central to the learning that happens in schools, and that caring relationships are a precursor to learning. According to caring theorists, schools are structured around aesthetic caring, which is attention to things and ideas rather than people (Eaker-Rich & Van Galen, 1996; Gilligan, 1982; Noddings, 1984; Prillaman & Eaker, 1994). Aesthetic caring is concerned with things like objectives, curriculum, and teaching strategies. Rolón-Dow (2005) explains, "Individuals who care aesthetically are committed to the school-sanctioned practices and behaviors believed to lead to educational achievement" (p. 86). These practices and behaviors are very narrowly defined. That is, aesthetic caring places value on a very limited range of behaviors. If students' behavior doesn't fall in this range, it means they do not care.

Rather than aesthetic care, caring theorists advocate for authentically caring relationships between teachers and students. Noddings (1984) argued that it is the responsibility of the teacher to initiate and cultivate these caring relationships and become engrossed in the students' lives. This means teachers must be concerned about students' lives both inside and outside of school. Noddings also stressed that these caring relationships need to be reciprocal. Often teachers believe they care about their students but the students do not believe those same teachers care about them. Noddings (1992) explained, "No matter how hard teachers try to care, if the caring is not received by students, the claim 'they don't care' has some validity" (p. 15). Caring is also not a one size fits all approach. Different students may need to be cared for in different ways, or the same student on different days—listening to students rather than deciding what is best for them is imperative for teachers (Garza, 2009; Noddings, 2005).

Noblit (1993) added to caring theory by discussing the relationship between caring and power. He wrote that whereas he initially believed that power was inherently oppressive, after doing research in a second grade classroom he came to realize that the kind of caring the teacher exhibited stemmed from her authority in the classroom. He explained that the teacher's "authority came from her willingness to take responsibility for creating a context for children to participate in, and from the children themselves who, after all, can and often do deny adults the right to control them" (p. 37). Power is socially constructed. As Dr. Anne Haas Dyson explained one day in a discussion about teacher authority in schools, we (teachers) have no power unless the children give it to you. In my own experience, I have witnessed teachers trying to exert power and authority where they have none because they have not sufficiently shown students that they care about them and respect them. The caring that teachers should show students is inextricably linked to their authority in the classroom.

Critical Race Theory

One of the central tenets of critical race theory (CRT) is that racism is integral to the way our society and its institutions are organized rather than something tangential that can be eradicated with minor policy changes (Ladson-Billings, 1998; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Parker, 1998). Operating from that belief, our task becomes one of “unmasking and exposing racism in its various permutations” (Ladson-Billings, 1998, p. 11). A second central focus of CRT is the importance of counter-storytelling. Solórzano and Yosso (2002) explained that CRT “recognizes that the experiential knowledge of people of color is legitimate, appropriate, and critical to understanding, analyzing, and teaching about racial subordination” (p. 26). Counter-storytelling is also important because it provides a counter-narrative to dominant narratives of colorblindness and reverse racism that are constantly reproduced. These dominant narratives are often used as a way to bolster anti-affirmative action arguments and as a way to explain the persistence of the so-called achievement gap. These dominant narratives often promote the myth of meritocracy and therefore attribute people’s inability to succeed academically to individual failure. I am connecting the importance of counter-storytelling to the importance of privileging students’ voices in this paper as well. The dominant narrative is that students are not successful in school because they don’t care, or because they come from families that do not value education. By giving students a voice, I believe I am employing counter-storytelling since students have generally been silenced in conversations about education.

Another central tenet of CRT is a critique on liberalism. As Ladson-Billings (1998) asserted, “racism requires sweeping changes, but liberalism has no mechanism for such change” (p. 12). Related to that is the argument that liberal reform only occurs to the extent that white people benefit from it. We can see an example of that right here at the University of Illinois. Our

former mascot, Chief Illiniwek, was protested for decades as being a racist symbol. It is not until the NCAA declared that the university could not host any post-season tournaments as long as they kept the Chief that he was finally retired as the official mascot. The university responded only when their revenues were being threatened; the mascot did not get retired because the university finally “came around” and agreed that the Chief was in fact a racist symbol. This idea of interest convergence (Bell, 2004) is also present in urban school reform. Research has documented many examples of schools where (generally because of tracking policies) one school is essentially providing two different types of education: a college preparatory education for its white and higher income students and a mediocre education for its students of color and poor students (Noguera, 2003). I argue that these pockets of quality education in otherwise mediocre school districts are for the benefit of the white families these schools are trying to attract.

I believe that CRT provides a good lens for addressing the shortcomings of caring theory. That is, caring theory does not take issues of race, class, and power into consideration when talking about the way teachers need to care for students. Ignoring race means also ignoring the way racism reproduces the inequities students face in their daily lives. If we are unwilling to respond to the realities of our students’ lives then we are not, in fact, caring for them. As Rolón-Dow (2005) explained, caring theory “did not yield sufficient explanatory power as I sought to understand how the present sociocultural context and the racial relations therein affected caring and teacher-student relationships” (p. 86). Rolón-Dow advocates for “a race-centered critical care praxis that is relevant to marginalized groups of students within educational institutions” (p. 90). The findings in this paper draw from Rolón-Dow’s ideas and describe an instantiation of critical care in practice.

Liberatory Pedagogy

I decided to use liberatory pedagogy as a lens because of my focal teacher, Kurian Joseph. Kurian told me that this was the philosophy that undergirded his teaching in both curricular design and pedagogical practices. As part of his participation in an inquiry group, he reads the first two chapters of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Freire, 1970) at the beginning of every school year to help remind him of his purpose and goals. On the basis of his work with poor workers in Brazil, Freire explained that one of the main goals of liberatory education is a critical understanding of the humanity of all people—both the oppressed and the oppressors. According to Freire,

In order for the oppressed to be able to wage the struggle for their liberation, they must perceive the reality of oppression not as a closed world from which there is no exit, but as a limiting situation which they can transform. This perception is a necessary but not sufficient condition for liberation; it must become the motivating force for liberating action. (p. 49)

Freire was very clear that this education was not something that could be done *to* the oppressed, but rather *with*, in solidarity. The quest for liberation does not start until the oppressed believe in themselves and their own capability for acting to transform their conditions:

This discovery cannot be purely intellectual but must involve action; nor can it be limited to mere activism, but must include serious reflection: only then will it be a praxis. . . .

Attempting to liberate the oppressed without their reflective participation in the act of liberation is to treat them as objects which must be saved from a burning building. (p. 65)

According to the Freirian model of liberatory education, the purpose of the educator is not to fill his or her students with information, but rather to pose “the problems of human beings

in their relations with the world” (p. 79). The teacher is not the leader or the knowledgeable being in the classroom, but rather one who engages in dialogue with his or her students. Freire said, “The teacher presents the material to the students for their consideration, and re-considers her earlier considerations as the students express their own” (p. 81). In a liberatory classroom, the teacher assists the students with developing the tools to see their world critically in order to transform it. Considering the political climate teachers work in today (e.g., strictly regulated curriculum focused on increasing standardized test scores), this work is difficult.

Ethnographic Research on Caring

What does it mean to care? Much of the existent ethnographic caring research describes settings where different members of school communities talk about caring. At the same school, teachers would make statements about how many of their students did not care about school and the students would also say that their teachers did not care about them. Valenzuela (1999) did an ethnographic study in a large urban high school in Texas over a three-year period, focusing on the schooling experiences of Mexican American and Mexican immigrant students. She discusses at length these conflicting statements between the teachers and the students in the school: “At issue, often, is a mutual misunderstanding of what it means to ‘care about’ school” (pp. 21-22). Valenzuela makes the distinction between aesthetic caring and authentic caring, as discussed in the section on caring theory. Valenzuela explained that teachers at Seguin High School (where she did her study)

tend to overinterpret urban youths’ attire and off-putting behavior as evidence of a rebelliousness that signifies that these students ‘don’t care’ about school. Having drawn that conclusion, teachers then often make no further effort to forge effective reciprocal relationships with this group. (p. 22)

The school's overemphasis on form and content does not address these other aspects of education, which are valuable to the students and their families. Students do not feel as though their teachers care anything about them and teachers interpret students' talk, dress, and behavior as defiant and as an indication that they do not care.

Importantly, caring means different things to different people. Often what counts as caring is embedded with political, cultural, and social meanings (Antrop-González & DeJesús, 2006). Antrop-González & DeJesús conducted an ethnographic study in two small community-based high schools (one in Chicago and one in Brooklyn), investigating "ways in which these two schools create a culture of high academic expectations for their students and value high-quality interpersonal relationships between students and teachers" (p. 409). They argued that although the schools were not typical (small, community-based, created as alternatives to traditional schooling), their findings can still be applied in a broader context. Namely, they found that what these two schools did well included: (a) teachers demonstrating authentic caring (as defined earlier in this chapter, in contrast with aesthetic caring) as an intentional part of their practice; (b) schools feeling like extended family and being rooted in the community; (c) teachers enacting a culture of high expectations, and (d) the schools being a safe place for students. Examining caring as experienced by students in schools in a sociopolitical and cultural context is extremely important. Antrop-González & DeJesús explained these schools "are not created in sociopolitical/historical vacuums" (p. 410).

Many teachers hold the belief that students' failure in school is due to individual shortcomings and proceed under the idea that if students just tried harder they would do better in school (Rolón-Dow, 2005, p. 95). Teachers interviewed by Valenzuela (1999) and Rolón-Dow often made such statements, often about students of color. Valenzuela interviewed a teacher who

said “‘I’m not here to baby-sit and I’m certainly not their parent . . . I finally told them, ‘Listen, you don’t have to be here if you don’t want to be here’” (p. 66). One of the teachers Rolón-Dow interviewed said about her students’ parents, “They just don’t care . . . They don’t care about their kids. They don’t care if their kids succeed or fail . . . when I have kids and I don’t see their parents all year, what does that say?” (p. 93). Sentiments like these which blame individual students (and their parents) for academic failure “castigates those who fail for not trying or caring enough while school structures, policies, and practices are left unexamined” (Rolón-Dow, 2005, p. 94). The popular notion that school failure is “the by-product of individual actions—a failure to study and do homework, to behave in class, to attend school regularly” is constantly reproduced (Noguera, 2008, p. 228). Teachers and other stakeholders consistently repeat these ideas despite the fact that the pattern of school success and lack thereof “corresponds so closely with larger societal patterns of race and class privilege” (Noguera, 2008, p. 228).

Much of the data Valenzuela (1999) collected came from open-ended interviews with students and teachers. In one conversation with a ninth grade English teacher, the teacher lamented, “‘As if teaching were not enough to preoccupy myself with . . . it’s uncomfortable for me to deal with someone who is hard set with the idea that teachers are the enemy’” (pp. 72-73). Teachers who feel like it’s not their job to _____ (fill in the blank with anything not directly related to teaching their content) is very commonplace, and it is often because of the pressure they are under to raise test scores. Valenzuela explained that statements such as the one made by this teacher are due “to an institutional ‘fetish’ that views academics as the exclusive domain of the school” (p. 73).

This preoccupation with academics as the only thing teachers should be concerned with is a critique on teacher training and educational policy as well. According to No Child Left Behind,

the definition of a highly qualified teacher is one who has at least a bachelor's degree from a four year institution, is certified in their state, and has demonstrated competence in the academic subjects (e.g., if you are a math teacher you have sufficient coursework in mathematics) in which the teacher teaches (this definition was taken from Washington state's education website, www.k12.wa.us, but applies nationwide). Our current definitions of what makes a teacher highly qualified or well-prepared do not take into consideration anything other than content knowledge and methodological expertise.

Student voice. Missing from most discussions on how to improve schooling are the students themselves. Nieto (1994) eloquently stated, "Student voices sometimes reveal the great challenges and even the deep pain young people feel when schools are unresponsive, cold places . . . those who spend the most time in schools and classrooms are often given the least opportunity to talk" (p. 420). Getting students' opinions on what is important to them in the classroom and under what conditions they best learn should be very informative for all educators and those interested in education reform. Lee (1999) explains how it is important to hear students' voices about school reform "to challenge educators about their assumptions and understandings of low-performing students" (p. 217).

One of the major themes among student voices in the research was talk about schools being uncaring or places where they feel alienated (Lee, 1999; Rolón-Dow, 2005; Valenzuela, 1999). Students who were interviewed made comments such as, "It's like the school failed me and I had to suffer for it. Does that sound right to you?" (Valenzuela, 1999, p. 154). One student talked about her frustration over getting in trouble for dress code violations: "I go to class to learn! School should be about me learning and not about what I wear! This is bullshit!" (Valenzuela, p. 80). Students also talked about apathetic teachers "It's a lot of teachers in this

school that's always saying, 'I can sit here and not give y'all nothing and I don't even gotta teach y'all and I still get paid'" (Lee, 1999, p. 230). Lee's ethnographic research focused on the causes of student failure primarily from talking to students who had been deemed failing (based on GPA, attendance, and behavior) in a Bay Area high school. Students interviewed for Lee's research talked about how they frequently cut classes and nobody ever said anything to them about it, and they would still pass their classes. All these statements are reflective of students feeling like they are in schools where no one cares about them, or they care about the wrong things. Statements such as these show how environments are produced where students feel as if they are not valued or cared about; they then react in such a way that makes teachers think they don't care about school.

In their project with high school students from the Los Angeles Unified School District, Garcia, Agbemakplido, Abdella, Lopez, and Registe (2006) asked, "Can one assume that a highly qualified teacher (by NCLB standards) teaches in a highly qualified manner?" (p. 704). There is something more to teaching that is not covered by NCLB's definition of a highly qualified teacher (see above for definition). One of the high school student contributors to Garcia et al. gave her definition of a highly qualified teacher: "The best thing you can do is to give your students the cultural respect they crave, positive interactions with adults who understand young people, and a responsive learning community where everyone is comfortable being themselves" (p. 718). In this student's view, excellent teaching involves how teachers interact with students, showing students respect that is specifically related to the students' culture, and creating a classroom environment conducive to learning. Her description of "cultural respect" stood out to me because it demonstrated a pushback from any kind of colorblind theory of care. She demanded respect for her cultural identity. Similarly, a high school student interviewed by

Valenzuela (1999) in Houston said one of the things that made someone a good teacher was being one who “loves Mexicans and the Spanish language that we speak” (p. 157). These students are calling for a kind of care/respect that is connected to their racial/ethnic identity. As Rolón-Dow (2005) explains, “To care for students of color in the United States, we must seek to understand the role that race/ethnicity has played in shaping and defining the sociocultural and political conditions of their communities” (p. 104).

Garza (2009) investigated white and Latino high school students’ perceptions of caring through the use of interviews, questionnaires, and observations. He analyzed the frequency of student comments to present themes in order of most commonly mentioned to least commonly mentioned. His findings, listed in order of frequency, were that students felt that caring teachers:

- (a) provide scaffolding during a teaching episode, (b) reflect a kind disposition through actions, (c) are always available to the student, (d) show a personal interest in the student’s well-being inside and outside the classroom, (e) and provide affective academic support in the classroom setting (p. 310).

He found differences between Latino and white students’ responses, however. The Latino student participants commented most frequently on providing scaffolding and least frequently on reflecting a kind disposition, whereas the white students commented most frequently on reflecting a kind disposition and least frequently on providing affective academic support in the classroom. Garza found that although all the students in his study (both white and Mexican) expressed a desire to have caring relationships with their teachers, the ways in which they wanted to be cared for differed. According to Garza, this suggests a need for teachers to get to know their students’ backgrounds and cultures in order to care for students the way they want to

be cared for. His research intended to center student voices as well as address a gap in the research on voices of high school students particularly.

Investigating nuance in teacher-student relationships. Rivera-McCutchen (2012) conducted an ethnographic study in a small high school in New York City. She went into her project wondering, “How did the school’s caring model adequately prepare students to be successful beyond graduation?” (p. 655). She conducted twenty-four interviews with school administration and staff, past and current, as well as alumni of the school and other people who were involved with the school in a more tangential way. She also did some classroom observations and sat in on meetings and professional development activities. Drawing from the literature on caring, she used six dimensions of caring to frame her analysis:

- (a) provide emotional and academic support, (b) expect high level of work from students,
- (c) value parents as resources, (d) have sociocultural and sociopolitical knowledge, (e) communicate standards, and (f) believe that students are capable. (p. 662)

Rivera-McCutchen found that the staff at the school “was effective at attending to the affective needs of their students” (675). She found that these affective behaviors came across as paternalistic because there was also a lack of high academic standards as well as “no evidence of a sustained dialogue among staff members of the students about how issues of race and class shaped the academic experiences of students” (p. 673). Rivera-McCutchen concluded that although the staff at this small high school demonstrated a specific kind of caring behavior, it was not enough to adequately prepare students to be successful after leaving the school.

Adding some nuance to the research on teacher-student relationships was a mixed-methods study done by Nasir, Jones, and McLaughlin (2011) in a high-poverty high school in the Bay Area. They looked at student connections to school in multiple ways—interpersonal

connection (with staff and peers) and institutional connection. They also looked at various ways of measuring the students' connections—behaviors (e.g., attendance, grades, test scores) and attitudes (e.g., the things they said in focus groups and interviews, and based on observations). Interestingly, they found that interpersonal connectedness was not necessarily correlated with institutional connectedness. That is, there were students who attended this high school that had good relationships with teachers and peers but were chronically not in class and/or not on track to graduate. They concluded that without paying attention to these nuances, other research

fail[ed] to capture the multilayered, complex factors that affect students' interpersonal or institutional connection with school. Studying connection to school in ways that more accurately reflect and assess the everyday realities of urban schools . . . and that consider students' life circumstances can provide needed insight and foundation for programs and policies intending to change school outcomes for youth. (p. 1785-1786)

Their research also raised questions about the purpose of establishing connections to school. Have teachers and other school staff failed if they develop meaningful relationships with students but those relationships do not lead to success in traditional school measures (e.g., grades and attendance)? Are traditional school measures (e.g., grades, standardized test scores, attendance) the only thing that matters when investigating whether or not teachers have been successful with students? These are questions I explore in chapters six and seven also.

Cholewa, Amatea, West-Olatunji, and Wright (2012) conducted a study where they examined “the relational processes of one culturally responsive teacher and her fifth grade African American students” (p. 250). They videotaped the teacher's math lessons during the first week of school. In their findings they talked about the ways the teacher built teacher-student connections (with individual students), attempted to establish teacher-class connections (during

interactions with the students as a whole class), and interacted in a transparent manner with her class about making mistakes, thereby establishing herself as part of the classroom community. Missing from this work is any data about how the students responded to the teacher, other than in their observable responses during the interactions. This research, although based on a limited data set, does show the ways in which a teacher attempts to connect with her students, rather than just discussing the importance of doing so. Their description of the teacher also revealed a teacher who was intent on pushing her students academically, rather than focusing solely on being nice and nurturing (Cholewa, et. al., 2012; Ware, 2006).

Fisher's (2007) ethnography of the Power Writer's program at a high school in the Bronx illustrated a powerful example of a teacher who consistently demonstrated critical care towards his students. Joe loved and respected his students. He valued students' lived experiences and saw his class as a critical space. Joe also sat among his students in the class rather than standing up in front of them. Joe described learning as "a form of decolonization: 'It's about being free—free from what the culture is trying to ascribe to us'" (p. 51). Joe's ability to create community and show students that he had a deep and profound respect for them was nothing short of amazing. Joe told his students, "I claim you, I will always claim you. You mine" (p. 91). Fisher concluded, "Young people are yearning to be chosen and to be claimed. Teachers must recognize this yearning and help young people develop the tools to transform this yearning into words and actions that chart the future they desire and deserve" (p. 100).

Historical context for African American children. Foster (1997) and others have done research which documents the emphasis on care that existed in schools during (legal) segregation when Black children were taught primarily by Black teachers (Foster, 1997; Irvine & Irvine,

1983; Perry, 2003; St. John & Cadray, 2004; Siddle Walker, 1996). Siddle Walker and Tompkins (2004) explain,

[The teachers] also generally came from the community in which they taught or from similar African American communities. As a result, the teachers brought to the classroom a good deal of understanding about the needs of the students and . . . could use this knowledge to enhance their understanding of particular student needs. (p. 80)

This research emphasized the ways that African American teachers and schools cared not only for the students inside the school but were also invested in the families and communities (Foster, 1997; Irvine & Irvine, 1983; Siddle Walker, 1996). I am bringing up this history because it also helps to contextualize the current practices of schooling for Black children in particular. The context of Black people's relationships with school and society matter; schooling does not happen in a vacuum. This is not to say that we should be yearning for the good old days of (legal) segregation; however, the research documents the ways in which Black families felt that the schools were responsive to their needs and working in the interest of their children.

Unless the larger institutional structures are corrected to facilitate a message of caring consistent with the interpersonal messages of caring, neither children nor their parents are likely to believe that African American children are being cared for. This failure may explain the distrust that many minority parents feel toward schools. (Siddle Walker & Tompkins, 2004, p. 92)

Culturally Responsive Pedagogy

Ladson-Billings (1994) explains that culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP) “uses student culture in order to maintain it and to transcend the negative effects of dominant culture” (p. 17). She goes on to say, “Culturally relevant teaching is a pedagogy that empowers students

intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes” (p. 18). Freire and Macedo (1987) explain that educators “need to use their students’ cultural universe as a point of departure, enabling students to recognize themselves as possessing a specific and important cultural identity” (p. 127). Culturally responsive (or relevant) teaching is an approach that affirms students’ cultural identities and uses students’ experiences, backgrounds, knowledge, and cultural practices as instructional tools in order to foster academic achievement (Foster, 1997; Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1994, 1995).

Freire repeatedly stated in many of his books that he was not looking to give educators a recipe. He said, “I cannot write a text that is filled with universal advice and suggestions” (Freire & Macedo, 1987, p. 135). This is also true for culturally relevant pedagogy. One cannot become a culturally relevant teacher by adopting a specific set of practices. Milner (2011) explains that there is such diversity among students in different classrooms and different schools, there is no one approach that will work with all students. Milner emphasizes how important it is for teachers to build relationships with individual students as a way to make instruction culturally relevant for those particular students. Milner looked at how a white teacher practiced culturally relevant pedagogy in a racially diverse urban classroom. Through observations and interviews, Milner concluded that the teacher “was able to build and sustain meaningful and authentic relationships with his students” (p. 76). In addition, he “recognized the multiple layers of identity among his students and confronted matters of race with them” (p. 76). He also “perceived teaching as a communal affair; he worked to create a culture of collaboration with colleagues” (p. 76).

Based on these findings, it is evident that culturally relevant pedagogy involves much more than just curricular choices and pedagogy. Milner’s case study teacher was able to effectively teach in a culturally relevant way because he spent time and effort getting to know his

students. The more teachers know about their students the better they can make instructional decisions that are specific to them, both in regards to capitalizing on the knowledge they bring and moving them forward. In addition, committing time to building relationships communicates to students that teachers care about them, which will make them more trusting and invested in their teachers, the class, and school in general. Ware (2006), in a case study of two African American elementary school teachers, found that “relationship building was as important as teaching the subject matter” (p. 443). Pre-service teachers cannot be taught how to build relationships with their future students. Teacher educators can communicate to pre-service teachers the importance of building relationships, but there is no one way to do this. Teachers must believe in its importance and then work at it.

One aspect of culturally relevant teaching is that teachers should be talking with students about racism and the prevalence of racism in the United States (Brown-Jeffy & Cooper, 2011; Ladson-Billings, 2001). Ladson-Billings explains, “To prepare teachers to be successful with African American students, teacher educators must help prospective teachers recognize the ways that race and racism structure the everyday experiences of all Americans” (p. 211). Brown-Jeffy and Cooper discuss incorporating tenets of CRT into culturally relevant pedagogy. They argue that culturally relevant pedagogy “does not question or critically examine the structures that feed into the cultural incongruence perspective” (p. 71), i.e., the disconnections between home and school cultures that often exist for students of color and poor students. They argue that including a discussion of racism is critical for culturally relevant pedagogy. They explain, “The broadness of race (and consequently racism) can be seen in the way that it focuses specifically on how privilege has been given and truncated in American society, something culture does not do” (p. 71).

It is not enough to affirm and celebrate difference. There needs to be discussion of issues of power as related to difference. These conversations can be difficult to have, especially considering the vast majority of teachers (white, middle class women) benefit from the existence of racism. Brown-Jeffy and Cooper (2011) explain, “In order for teachers to be culturally attuned to the identities of their students, they should be aware of their own identities” (p. 73). This is why Ladson-Billings (2001) advocates that antiracist education be incorporated into teacher preparation programs. She explains, “Course work that addresses the legitimacy of African American culture and problematizes Whiteness can begin to make preservice course work more meaningful for those who teach African American students” (p. 211). More thought needs to be put into how education programs can effectively incorporate antiracism into their coursework. Without critical awareness, schools will simply reproduce the inequalities that exist in greater society.

[If] teachers acknowledge that the system is racist, they can move forward to not only avoid socially reproducing the racism, but also to rethink the system, recognize their actions in it, change them if need be, and embrace all cultures as equally important.

(Brown-Jeffy & Cooper, p. 73)

This critical aspect was part of Ladson-Billings’s (1995) original explanation of CRP, but as school systems and teacher education programs have adopted CRP, that aspect has been often left out. Ladson-Billings (2014) comments, “What state departments, school districts, and individual teachers are now calling ‘cultural relevant pedagogy’ is often a distortion and corruption of the central ideas I attempted to promulgate” (p. 82). The result has been a reimagining of sorts, which I describe below.

Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy

Paris (2012) and Paris and Alim (2014) propose looking at culturally relevant pedagogy with a new lens, that of a pedagogy aimed at sustaining students' languages and cultures. They argue that culturally sustaining pedagogies would treat the students' cultural and linguistic practices as having "value in their own right and should be creatively foregrounded rather than merely viewed as resources to take students from where they are to some presumably 'better' place, or ignored altogether" (Paris & Alim, 2014, p. 87). This is instead of using students' language and culture solely as a bridge to mastering the learning styles and languages associated with the dominant culture.

Viewing students' linguistic and cultural practices as a *resource* is a departure from the deficit approaches that were "firmly in place prior to and during the 1960s and 1970s" (Paris, 2012, p. 93). Paris argues, however, that the way Ladson-Billings's (1995) conceptualization of culturally responsive pedagogy has been taken up by teacher education programs is a departure from the original intention, hence the need to reframe it. They argue that one aspect that has been missing from the ways culturally responsive pedagogy has been taken up is the critical component (Ladson-Billings, 2014; Paris, 2012; Paris & Alim, 2014). Paris (2012) posits that responsive/relevant pedagogy is necessary, but it does not go far enough in supporting students' linguistic and cultural flexibility nor does it equip students with the tools to critique society's power structures. Paris and Alim (2014) also stress the dynamic nature of cultural practices. They state, "Asset pedagogies too often draw overdeterministic links between race and language, literacy, and cultural practices . . . it is crucial that we understand the ways young people are enacting race, ethnicity, language, literacy, and cultural practices in both traditional *and* evolving ways" (p. 90). This speaks to the stance I took at the beginning of this chapter—viewing culture

as not something that people are born into but rather as something that is both changing and reproducing as people engage in cultural practices (Irizarry, 2007; Paris, 2009; Rosaldo, 1989).

Ladson-Billings (2014) talked about a class she designed at the University of Wisconsin that focused on a cohort of First Wave students (students who were attending the University as part of a special scholarship program for spoken word artists). She designed a class titled Pedagogy, Performance & Culture and half the seats were reserved for First Wave students. Ladson-Billings explained that she “depended on them to lead me to consider new ways of understanding how popular culture can be deployed to engage in conversations about critical theoretical concepts such as hegemony, audit cultures, and neoliberalism as well as to develop new pedagogical strategies” (p. 79). The class included some traditional elements—they read traditional social theorists, wrote papers, had class discussions. But the class also included a performative element. Their final project was to do a final cypher (public performance) in groups that consisted of First Wave and non-First Wave students. Ladson-Billings reflected, “The work surrounding the cypher helped me see how culturally relevant pedagogy can engage what may appear to be the least able students so that they can become intellectual leaders of a classroom” (p. 80). She explained that this process demonstrated to her the need for culturally relevant pedagogy to evolve to meet the changing needs of new groups of students, thereby supporting Paris and Alim’s (2012) notion of a culturally sustaining pedagogy.

Creating Dialogic Classrooms Where Knowledge is Socially Constructed

I went to a talk Pedro Noguera was giving to a group of teachers a few years ago. One teacher said that some of her students come to school with no background knowledge or experience. Pedro Noguera challenged her on this, to which the teacher responded, “Well, just not the kind of background knowledge I use in my classroom.” The imperative should be on the

teacher to take the students' background and experiences into account. "If the child is to participate in the community of the teacher, then the teacher must be able to participate in the community of the child" (Hymes, 1972, p. xxxix). This means teachers need to learn about their students and their lives outside of school. It is important to follow students' voices "into neighborhood corners and alley ways, off the beaten path of the curricular road, where the social action is" (Dyson, 1993, p. 7). This involves listening to students, asking about their lives, going places in the communities in which they live, rather than just making assumptions based on their race, class, etc. Teacher Mary Ginley explained her stance: "I have always spent time at the beginning of the year getting to know the children: talking to them, listening to them as they play, as they talk to their friends, as they try to tell me who they are" (Nieto, 2010, pp. 127-128).

Moll and Gonzales (1994) define funds of knowledge "as those historically accumulated and culturally developed bodies of knowledge and skills essential for household or individual functioning and well-being" (p. 160). They documented literacy practices where students "borrowed from each other's experiences in making sense of the stories, relating them to their own lives, and evaluating the worthiness of the books" (p. 156). In this way, students' lives were welcomed into the classroom and used as building blocks to learning new content; explicit connections are made between students' home lives and school lives (Dyson, 2003). Alim and Smitherman (2012) discussed a classroom project where the students investigated language in their communities. Students conducted ethnographic research where their social lives "are not marginalized inside the classroom or left outside the door, but they are seen as valuable cultural and linguistic spaces for learning" (pp. 181-182). Joe, a high school English teacher in the Bronx, created the Power Writing class in order to use "reading, writing, and speaking . . . as a vehicle for enacting power over [students'] lives and futures" (Fisher, 2007, p. 3).

It is our responsibility to learn about the actual lives of our students, because “assumptions are made in educational institutions about the literacy needs of individual students which seem not to be borne out by the students’ day-to-day lives” (Szwed, 1981, p. 427). As Dyson (2003) explained, “Like all learners, children must use familiar frames of reference (i.e., familiar practices) to make sense of new content, discursive forms, and symbolic tools” (p. 15). All children must be allowed the space to bring in their familiar frames to help them learn new concepts and content. As evidenced by the teacher’s comment at the beginning of this section, some teachers have a very narrow view of what kinds of experiences are worthwhile to bring in to the classroom. As Joe explained to Fisher (2007), “My students’ prior knowledge is profoundly respected by me and at some level exalted. This is not an attempt to colonize them. It is an attempt to extend on their natural learning capacity” (p. 13).

Rubin (2008) looked at local contexts of detracking in different schools. Detracking efforts at one heterogeneous school were part of a concerted effort to “bridge differences and provide greater educational opportunity for students, particularly for the school’s lower achieving students” (p. 677). She explained that the success of detracking efforts was dependent on “local understandings of students’ intellectual capacities” (p. 647). This is a key point. There are many ways that macro-level constructions of deficit are reproduced on the micro-level; however, local constructions of students’ abilities can also contest the macro-level constructions. Ladson-Billings (1995) states that one feature effective teachers had in common in her study was “a classroom practice grounded in what they believed about the educability of the students” (p. 484). One of Rubin’s focal teachers explained that one of his goals was for his students “to develop greater cultural awareness and a more enlightened understanding of difference” (p. 681). Because of these explicit goals he was intentional about connecting his course content to local

issues and understood the importance of making personal connections with his students to help them be better connected to the class.

One effective pedagogical strategy is to organize instruction—especially literacy instruction—around dialogic instruction. Nystrand (1997) built on Bakhtin’s (1981) theories about utterances being situated in particular contexts—individual utterances are responses to previous utterances as well as always anticipating future responses. In classrooms organized around dialogic instruction, meanings are constructed in the interactions between students and students and teacher. The teacher is not the authoritative voice, but one of many voices. As opposed to traditional instruction, where teachers transmit an already constructed body of knowledge to students, “dialogic instruction works by cultivating knowledge—transforming understandings through reflection and talk” (Nystrand, 1997, p. 26). In dialogic discussions, “comprehension is enhanced when the teacher encourages students to work from a store of personal knowledge” (Nystrand, 1997, p. 20). Similarly, in looking at small group discussions, Chisholm and Godley (2011) found that “the discussion questions that promoted highly specific, personally relevant, and experience-driven student responses . . . led to richer engagement with sociolinguistic content knowledge than more general, hypothetical discussion questions” (p. 454). If we already know that learning is fundamentally social and students learn best when they can build from the known to the new, then organizing a classroom around dialogic instruction where students’ knowledge is a valuable and necessary part of constructing new knowledge makes sense.

The thread that runs through all the research in this section is not just a fundamental belief that all students can learn but also a belief that knowledge is constructed, rather than a static body that should be passed from teacher to students. Organizing a classroom where

students' voices are legitimized and their contributions are valued is an important part of this. Teachers also should position themselves as co-learners, as people who also have "a wealth of life experiences from which he or she can draw, and is constantly challenging his or her own thinking about the world . . . a practitioner of the craft . . . a reader and writer" (Fisher, 2007, p. 14).

Power and Discipline in Schools

For pre-service as well as novice teachers, classroom management is always an area of major concern. It is common to hear teachers say you must first have control of your class before you can teach anything. Students' behavior in schools is often framed in terms of students making "good" choices versus "bad" choices. Because we often see student behavior and resultant punishment as the result of individual students' choices, schools also conceal the nature of punishment.

In order to look at schools' discipline practices from a different angle it is important to look at the work of Michel Foucault. He argued that schools, similar to other institutions in society, possess disciplinary power that replaced the power of the sovereign (Foucault, 1977). According to Foucault, one of the features of our modern-day system is constant surveillance, which produces subjects who discipline themselves under the fear they are always being watched. This creates a system where people "fall in line" with the expectations for behavior because of this self-regulation. Ferguson (2000) adds, "Rules are spoken about as inherently neutral, impartially exercised, and impervious to individual feelings and personal responses" (p. 52). This contributes to the idea that students "deserve" their punishments because the rules themselves and the way they are enforced are never called into question.

Especially applicable to schools are the roles that punishments and rewards play in disciplinary power. Schools construct categories of people (good, bad, gifted, at risk, etc.). Foucault (1977) describes the practice of punishment and rewards in this way: “It measures in quantitative terms and hierarchizes in terms of value the abilities, the level, the ‘nature’ of individuals. It introduces, through this value-giving measure, the constraint of a conformity that must be achieved” (p. 183). Ferguson (2000) adds a further explanation of Foucault’s ideas: “Routine practices of classification, the ranking of academic performance through tests and grades, psychological screening measures, the distribution of rewards and punishment construct the ‘truth’ of who we are” (p. 53). Both Ferguson and Foucault emphasize the subjective nature of disciplinary power, which is masked by these processes they describe. Foucault continues, “every instant in the disciplinary institutions compares, differentiates, hierarchizes, homogenizes, excludes. In short, it *normalizes*” (p. 183). The purpose of disciplinary power is to establish a norm for behavioral expectations and then sort students accordingly. Key to Foucault’s argument is that these categories don’t exist outside of the structure that creates the labels and sorts students accordingly. All of these differences among students that are *labeled* by schools (such as the examples listed above) are also *constructed* by the schools. These labeling practices also construct the discourse around which we talk about and understand kids.

The dominant discourse in schools is that kids who get in trouble do so because they cannot follow the rules. They make choices and thus deserve the punishment they receive. It is assumed that it is the kids who are responsible for reproducing the patterns of punishment “rather than institutional operations themselves” (Ferguson, 2000, p. 20). One problem with this view is that it overlooks the amount of latitude teachers and administrators exercise over what kinds of misbehavior they respond to and what kinds of consequences are given. We can assume that

almost all kids “misbehave” at some point in school. Teachers respond to behavior very differently, however. One teacher in Ferguson’s study justified “the high rate of black kids getting in trouble by remarking on their different style of rule breaking: ‘The white kids are sneaky, black kids are more open’” (Ferguson, 2000, p. 178). Even if we believe this to be true, it is clearly a value-laden way to evaluate misbehavior. Why isn’t it more reprehensible for kids to misbehave behind a teacher’s back?

Typical examples of Black students’ (specifically Black boys) misbehavior in classrooms are characterized as disruptions. This includes joking, making noise, interrupting, etc. Ferguson (2000) explains, “Oral performance has a special significance in black culture for the expression of masculinity” (p. 179). She describes these disruptions as an oral performance, which is a way of performing a particular kind of masculinity. I think fondly of one of my former 8th grade students who would regularly “disrupt” our class and work on perfecting a comedy routine. We were indeed a captive audience for his performance. However, generally speaking, this “mode of self-representation epitomizes the very form the school seeks to exclude and eradicate” (p. 179). Also important is the adultification of Black male students (Ferguson, 2000; Kohl, 1994). Many (white, female) teachers interpret these oral performances as a serious threat rather than “a simple verbal clash” (Ferguson, 2000, p. 179). I would argue that there is already such a large chasm between Black male students and many white female teachers that often the teachers don’t have enough familiarity with their students to respond in a different way.

There is an extensive literature about the nature of discipline and punishment in schools as it relates to Black male students, which is beyond the scope of this chapter (Brown & Donnor, 2011; Ferguson, 2000; Howard, 2013; Kohl, 1994; Kunjufu, 1995; Lee, 1999; Noguera, 2003, 2008; Ware, 2006). Black students are more often monitored for misbehavior (surveillance,

similar to patterns in wider society), and when they get “caught,” their behavior is more likely to be responded to harshly by teachers and administrators (Ferguson, 2000; Foucault, 1977). Simply stated, “I believe Black and Brown students are over-policed and micromanaged in urban public schools” (Fisher, 2007, p. 33). This relates back to Foucault’s (1977) theory about how construction of dichotomous (good/bad) categories produces certain kinds of behavior. Black students are more often in serious trouble because they exhibit the kinds of behaviors that schools have *labeled* as troublesome.

Conclusion

My research is in conversation with the research I have reviewed in this chapter. My project investigates the construction of teacher-student relationships using a lens of caring theory, but using Critical Race Theory’s critique of caring theory’s lack of attention to issues of race and class. I argue that my focal teacher practices culturally responsive/sustaining pedagogy, especially considering the critical aspect of CRP. My project is an attempt to add to the conversation of “what does this look like?” when the majority of the research focuses mostly on how teachers fall short of creating culturally relevant classrooms. One of the ways I believe my focal teacher, Kurian Joseph, practices culturally responsive/sustaining pedagogy is through enactment and design of a curriculum that is relevant and dialogic. The way the institution of school structures many interactions between teachers and students was highlighted for me while talking to and observing the students in the field, which is why I have discussed issues of power and discipline in schools. The relationships are not constructed in a vacuum; the institutional context is important. In this chapter I have described the theoretical and empirical work that is connected to the major themes of my research. In the next chapter I describe design and methods I used to conduct my research.

Chapter 3

Methods

“The ethnographer seeks a deeper immersion in others’ worlds in order to grasp what they experience as meaningful and important. . . . Furthermore, immersion enables the fieldworker to directly and forcibly experience for herself both the ordinary routines and conditions under which people conduct their lives, and the constraints and pressures to which such living is subject” (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995, p. 2)

My goal in conducting this research is to investigate teacher-student relationships at this particular school. This project is a case study of one high school, with a closer look at one teacher and two of his classes. Because I am interested in the complexities inherent in classrooms and how broader socio-cultural issues influence classrooms and schools, I used ethnographic methods for this project (e.g., participant observation, open-ended interviews). The purpose of conducting ethnographic research is to figure out “what’s happening here” and how *participants make meaning out of what’s happening* (Dyson & Genishi, 2005). This is all situated in a broader socio-cultural context, as well as a context that is co-constructed by my participants (in this case teachers and students). My purpose was to look at the ways teacher-student relationships are constructed in classrooms in interactions, as well as investigate how broader issues of race, class, power, and educational policy play a role in these interactions. Most of all, I am interested in what these relationships mean to the people involved.

In addition to observing class sessions I conducted interviews with students and several teachers. I also conducted in-depth narrative interviews with my focal teacher, Kurian Joseph. I was interested in learning more about how this specific phenomenon (teacher-student relationships) fits into his broader narrative, including his individual experiences and social, cultural, and institutional narratives (Clandinin, 2013). I was drawn to in-depth interviewing as a way of “understanding the lived experience of other people and the meaning they make out of

that experience” (Seidman, 2013, p. 9). Clandinin further explains, “The focus of narrative inquiry is . . . an exploration of the social, cultural, familial, linguistic, and institutional narratives within which individuals’ experiences were, and are, constituted, shaped, expressed, and enacted” (p. 18). In conducting my narrative interviews I aimed to learn more about how Kurian came to teaching as a career, how he framed his daily teaching experiences, and how he reflected on these experiences with me. I wanted to see how my classroom observations fit with my participant’s construction of his teaching experience as a whole.

I have kept in mind “the task of the ethnographer is not to determine ‘the truth’ but to reveal the multiple truths inherent in others’ lives” (Emerson et al., 1995, p. 3). This is also the case with my interviews—my purpose was not to uncover the truth, but the things my participants chose to tell me at that particular time and place are still important. Briggs (1986) makes clear that researchers should treat interviews as speech events. Our conversations with interview participants reveal things the participants choose to tell us in that particular context. Interviewing gave me valuable information about how they viewed their experiences and chose to represent them to me.

Research Questions

1. How are relationships between teachers and students constructed?
 - a. What is the nature of teacher-student interactions?
 - b. What are the societal factors (e.g., race, gender, class) made salient in these relationships? In what way?
2. What are teachers’ beliefs on the role of teacher-student relationships in teaching?
 - a. What do teachers believe to be “good” relationships with students?

- b. How do teachers view teacher-student relationships relative to other aspects of their job?
- 3. How do institutional mandates figure into teachers' construction of teacher-student relationships?
- 4. How do students view teacher-student relationships?
 - a. What do students think makes a good teacher?
 - b. What is the nature of student perceptions of teacher efforts to build relationships with them?

Research Site

School. Mandela High School is a small high school in Chicago, currently with 308 students in grades 9-12 (all school-wide data was pulled from the Chicago Public Schools website). The school opened in 2005 as part of a citywide school reform plan and was designed with a focus on social justice. Importantly, the school's designers had a long history of living and working in the neighborhood in which the school is located and had also been involved in other aspects of work in the community, such as the fight for affordable housing and improving public education, which will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter. I will talk about my own connections to the site in much greater detail later in this chapter and in the next one, but it is important to know that my mother is one of the three founders of the school, and she still works there; she was not involved in any of this research project. When Mandela opened, it was for grades 6-9, and it added a grade on every year until it grew to the 12th grade. Because of enrollment issues, 6th grade was cut and then eventually 7th and 8th grade. The sophomores (focal students) who attended Mandela for 7th and 8th grade were the last 8th grade class. Although it is a regular public school (i.e., not a charter), it is not a neighborhood school. In other words, it is

not the default school for a particular zone; students at Mandela must elect to enroll there. Students come from both the neighborhood and elsewhere in the city, and there are constant challenges with enrollment and recruiting students. The existence of the school is always in a precarious state due to low enrollment, a citywide school budgeting crisis, and politics. This shaky ground is felt by staff and students alike—both students and teachers expressed to me in interviews worries about what might happen if the school closed.

According to the district website, the student demographics at the time of the study were 81.8% Black, 11% Hispanic, 2.6% White, 2.3% Asian and 2.3% other. 95.8% of the students were considered low income, 24.4% received special education services and 7.1% were considered limited English proficient. Because the school is so small, the staff is relatively small as well, especially compared to other high schools in Chicago. There were 23 teachers working at Mandela during the 2014–15 school year. Of those 23 teachers, six of them had been teaching there all 10 years of Mandela’s existence, three had been there for 8-9 years, seven had been there for 5–7 years, three had been there for 3–4 years, and 4 had been there for 1–2 years. The school’s population and teaching staff had decreased over the last few years—there were about 150 fewer students in this enrollment year than there were two years earlier.

According to the Chicago Public School’s website, Mandela’s average ACT score was 16.6 in 2014. The average composite ACT score in Chicago Public Schools (CPS) was 18 in 2014—but that is a misleading comparison. Chicago Public Schools essentially operates on a two-tiered system for high schools especially—selective enrollment high schools and non-selective enrollment high schools (Mandela was NOT a selective enrollment high school). The average ACT scores at the selective enrollment high schools were much higher, pulling the entire district’s average up and hiding the disparities in the system. Chicago Public Schools does not

publish disaggregated ACT averages for comparing selective and non-selective enrollment high schools. When I surveyed the Chicago Public Schools website, I noticed the average ACT scores of several selective enrollment high schools ranged from 26–29. The average ACT score for another local high school (non-selective enrollment) was 15.6 in 2014, and the average ACT score for the neighborhood high school in the neighborhood in which I taught last year was 14 (for comparison's sake). Mandela's 2014 graduation rate was 82.8%, compared with a system-wide rate of 71.9% (again, a percentage pulled up by the drastically higher graduation rates at the selective enrollment high schools).

Teachers at Mandela created their own curriculum, which had upsides and downsides. The upside, of course, was the freedom and the autonomy that many teachers do not get. The downside was that it took a lot of work to create everything from scratch! Jin, the curriculum coordinator, explained to me that the freedom was not a good match for every teacher. He also said he wanted to move to a system where teachers who end up leaving at least leave unit frameworks in place so incoming teachers would have something to go by that they can then modify as they wish. The teachers were not completely free to do what they wanted in their classrooms, however. They still had the same pressure to raise standardized test scores, and thus the pressure of what's going to be on the test informed their curricular decisions. Kurian (my focal teacher) was in a slightly better place because his subject is not a tested subject, so this gave him a greater degree of freedom in terms of content.

Community. Chicago is a racially diverse city, but very much segregated by neighborhood. According to a 2011 study done by Northwestern, 68 of 77 community areas had a population where over 50% of the residents identify by a single racial group. Most of the community areas that were predominantly Black, however, were around 90–95% Black. So

whereas white residents in Chicago live in increasingly diverse neighborhoods, the same is not true for most Black residents. Lakewood, the neighborhood in which Mandela is located, was 52.1% white, 18.9% Black, 15.9% Latino, and 11% Asian, making it one of the more diverse neighborhoods in the city. In terms of income, 27.7% of Lakewood's residents lived below the poverty level. The demographics of the neighborhood are clearly very different from the demographics of the school, however. Those recent statistics also did not show how the demographics of the neighborhood have changed or the tensions that have existed for many years in Lakewood. Like many neighborhoods in Chicago, Lakewood has been experiencing gentrification, and there are longstanding tensions between newer, higher-income residents and lower-income residents. The history of the school and community will be discussed in much more detail in the next chapter.

Participants

Focal teacher. Kurian Joseph is a history/social sciences teacher who has been teaching at Mandela for ten years. His first year of full time teaching was the first year Mandela existed. Kurian was born in a suburb outside Chicago and then moved out of state when he was young—to a midsize city in the South. Both of his parents are immigrants, both from a part of Southern India that is Catholic. Kurian attended predominantly white Catholic schools up until college. He went to an Ivy League college. Kurian's legal name is Paul Kurian Joseph, and he went by Paul until he graduated from college (this will be discussed further in Chapter 4). Kurian moved to Chicago in 2002 because his sister was there attending medical school. I met Kurian about eight years ago but didn't know him very well prior to beginning my research. He and his wife came to Atlanta when I lived there, and I showed them around, but I still mostly just knew him as my mother's coworker who was around my age. So, unlike many of the other teachers at Mandela, I

did not consider him a friend, nor have I known him for nearly as long as some of the other teachers. This was one of the secondary reasons I chose him as a focal teacher—I knew I was doing research at a site I felt very close to so this was a way for me to get as much distance as possible within that site.

Kurian taught US History to mostly sophomores (there were some upper classmen in his classes either because they needed to make up a credit or they transferred into Mandela and had not taken the course before), and he also taught a Civics class for juniors and seniors. Because Mandela was small and because the school experienced cuts in staff, almost every teacher taught more than just one class. When I first started “casing the joint,” I spent time in both the Civics class and the US History class. I decided to do my research with the US History class because the Civics class was mostly students who had Kurian as a teacher before. In most cases, those relationships were already in place, so the teacher-student interactions were different. I made that decision based on a short period of observation in the Civics classes, but those classes seemed more laid back to me—students came in and got to work faster, Kurian did not need to explain as much, and other things that made the class feel to me like they had already gelled more than a typical class would have been by October. My thought was that the students in Civics classes were already familiar with Kurian’s personality and the way he generally liked to do things—it felt to me like the relationships were already in place. Since my research questions were about how relationships are constructed in the classroom, it seemed that observing Kurian interact with students whom he had no previous relationship with would be a more appropriate choice.

I chose Kurian as my focal teacher for two main reasons. One because he was known to be well-liked by his students, and I was going into this project to investigate how he achieved this. Also, I was intentionally looking for a focal teacher who was not Black. I think that often

when talking about Black students and teachers who can relate well to them, it is too easy to dismiss things Black teachers are able to accomplish because non-Black teachers feel like “well, that could never be me.” I don’t fully agree with that kind of thinking, but I was purposely trying to avoid that response.

Kurian was a very even-keeled teacher. His demeanor with his students always felt personable, but still focused on the work of the day. He wore a shirt and tie every day except Friday, which was standard among male teachers at Mandela. I was impressed by his level of consistency—he never appeared tired or in a bad mood. Even on the occasions he expressed frustration with students’ talking or lack of attention, he went right back to his calm demeanor. He was also very passionate about social justice issues, which will be discussed in much further detail later in my findings chapters.

Focal classes. I collected data in two of Kurian’s classes—his 2nd period class, an honors-level class, and his 3rd period class, a regular-level class. On the days I was there, I did not notice much of a difference in terms of the way the two classes were taught, either in teaching methods or content. The honors class had to do a little bit more homework than the regular class. I asked how decisions were made about which students go into honors class or regular classes and was told that the decisions are made by the student’s same subject teacher their previous year. So, the freshman history teacher would have recommended students for Kurian’s honors versus regular classes based on his perceptions of their effort and ability as well as their grades. Because Mandela High School was so small, sometimes adjustments were made for students in order to make their schedules work (e.g., logistical issues). During the time I was there, two students were transferred from Kurian’s 5th period class (regular level) to his 3rd period honors class. I

believe this happened due to a combination of the student expressing interest in taking honors classes and earning good grades during the first quarter.

The 2nd period class consisted of 30 students, two of whom had Individualized Education Plans (IEPs). Of those 30 students, 20 were female and 10 were male. There were 25 students who identified as Black, 3 who identified as white, one who identified as Asian and one who identified as Latino. The 3rd period class consisted of 32 students, 9 of whom had IEPs. Of those 32 students, there were 24 boys and 8 girls. Although discussion of the politics of tracking is outside the scope of this paper, it is clear that the balance of male and female students was very different in the two classes, and I do not believe this was by accident. There were 29 students who identified as Black and three students who identified as Latino (see tables 3.1 and 3.2). During 3rd period, there was a special education teacher who came to help out fairly regularly when I was there because students within her caseload were clustered in that class. However, she left around the winter holidays to take a job working with younger students. After that, there were substitutes who came in during 3rd period, or no one at all. Of the 62 students in both classes, 18 of them attended Mandela for 7th and/or 8th grade. Also, 23 of them had a connection to Lakewood—they still live there or they used to. The larger class sizes are a reflection of citywide budget cuts for Chicago Public Schools.

Most days I was there, the desks were arranged in pairs. Three rows of pairs (going back four pairs, so 24 desks altogether) faced forward to the smart board, and an additional three pairs were farther away from the smart board (closer to where I sat), and angled in so as to be able to see the smart board better. There were two desks in the back where students sat not touching another desk. These non-paired desks were used during 3rd period but not 2nd period.

Table 3.1.—2nd period Students

Name	Gender	Race ²	Year in school
Sasha	Female	Black	senior
Ibrahim	Male	Black/Somalian	sophomore
Tamera	female	Black/Belizean	Sophomore
Jalen	Male	Black	Sophomore
Brittany	Female	Black	Sophomore
Carsyn	Female	white	Sophomore
Camryn	Female	white	Sophomore
Zenobia	Female	Black	Sophomore
Sanaa	Female	Black/Eritrean on mom's side	Sophomore
Samantha	Female	Latino/Puerto Rican/Cuban	Sophomore
Porsha E.	Female	Black	Sophomore
Kejuan	Male	Black	Sophomore
LaChyrell	Female	Black	Sophomore
Mimi	Female	Black	Sophomore
Brianna	Female	Black	Junior
Aniyah	Female	Black	Sophomore
Yemisi	Female	Black/Nigerian	Sophomore
Jeremy	Male	Black	Sophomore
Sincere	Male	Black	Senior
Jamese	Female	Black	Sophomore
Isaac	Male	Black	Sophomore
Khamilyah	Female	Asian/Pakistani	Sophomore
Emanuel	Male	Black	Sophomore
Tinesha	Female	Black	Sophomore
Jabril	Male	Black	Sophomore
Aubrey	Female	white	Sophomore
Jada	Female	Black	Sophomore
Devin	Male	Black	Sophomore
Jeremiah	Male	Black	Sophomore
Porsha W.	female	Black	sophomore

² This is based on how students self-identified to me in a survey.

Table 3.2—3rd period students

Name	Gender	Race	Year in school
Justin	Male	Black	Sophomore
Shameka	Female	Black	Sophomore
Davonte	Male	Black	Sophomore
Shawndriell	Female	Black	Sophomore
Abel	Male	Latino/Puerto Rican	Sophomore
Aminah	Female	Black	Sophomore
Elijah	Male	Black/Eritrean on mom's side	Sophomore
Antoine C.	Male	Puerto Rican/Dominican	Sophomore
Jacara	Female	Black	Sophomore
Aaron	Male	Black	Sophomore
Ethan	Male	Black	Sophomore
Darius	Male	Black	Sophomore
Jabari	Male	Black	Sophomore
John	Male	Black	Senior
Courtney	Male	Black	Sophomore
LeShaun	Male	Black	Sophomore
Hassan	Male	Black/African (didn't specify a country)	Sophomore
Summer	Female	Black/Jamaican	Sophomore
Raynard	Male	Black	Sophomore
Delgado	Male	Black/Puerto Rican	Sophomore
Antoine S.	Male	Black	Sophomore
Jamar	Male	Black	Sophomore
Omar	Male	Black/African (didn't specify a country)	Sophomore
Ben	Male	Black/Eritrean	Sophomore
Krystal	Female	Black	Sophomore
Ashley	Female	Black	Sophomore
Luis	Male	Latino	Sophomore
Malika	Female	Black	Sophomore
Kendrick	Male	Black	Sophomore
Marcus	Male	Black	Sophomore
Kendrell	Male	Black	Sophomore
Andrew	male	Black	sophomore

Focal students. I interviewed twelve students as part of my data collection. I had been coming to Mandela for about three months (including the time I was there “casing the joint”) before I approached students to ask if they were willing to let me interview them (Dyson & Genishi, 2005, p. 19). I started by asking students who stood out to me in class because they talked a lot, but then tried to talk to a variety of students (e.g., a mix of boys and girls and students from both 2nd and 3rd period), including ones who hardly ever talked in class and ones with varying levels of participation in class. I thought about participation in terms of vocal participation in “official” class events as well as “unofficial” ways of participating, such as having unrelated conversations with classmates, doing work for other classes, or even putting their heads down. So I tried to interview students who represented a range of those kinds of participatory and non-participatory behaviors.

I also tried to find students who ranged in terms of the grades they were getting in class because I wanted to talk to students who had various relationships with school. Interestingly, because I never looked over their work, I had no idea what kinds of grades students were getting, so I had to ask Kurian. There were students who often participated in class but still had low grades because they didn’t consistently turn in work, and there were students who never spoke in class and got really good grades. I was more nervous about interviewing students than I was for any other aspect of my data collection. I approached the students in between classes and asked if they were willing to let me interview them. I interviewed them all in groups of two, and I would check with the pairs separately and make sure they were okay being interviewed together (which they always were). I generally tried to pair up a boy and a girl (only because then it would be easier for me to determine who was speaking when I went to transcribe the conversations), but one of my interviews was with two boys. I also tried to pair up a student in 2nd period with a

student in 3rd period just so I could make sure I was getting a good representation from both classes. I bought them lunch since we interviewed during their lunch period (from one of the fast food restaurants nearby—Sonic, McDonald’s, or Jimmy John’s). What follows is a brief description of my twelve focal students, all sophomores. I am listing them in the order in which I interviewed them.

I asked the students I interviewed about their grades. I found it really hard to get a straightforward answer from most of them—some students told me their grades varied depending on if they liked the class or not (e.g., Davonte said his grades in science and history were better than in English and math because those were his favorite classes), and they also reported that their grades varied over time. LeShaun talked about how his Spanish grade had dropped to a D at one point in the year so he stopped doing as much math work so he could work to bring his Spanish grade up (like a zero-sum game).

Even though I tried to get a representative of a group of students, I know that the twelve students I ended up interviewing were still skewed more towards students who talked a lot in class (in both official and un-official ways).

Mimi—Mimi was in Kurian’s honors class. When I first noticed her in the class, she sat off to the side and talked with her friends a lot. I didn’t notice her participation in official class activities until the day they talked about the non-indictment of Darren Wilson, the police officer in the Michael Brown shooting in Ferguson, Missouri. Mimi lived down the street from Mandela and had older siblings who went there as well. She attended Mandela for 7th and 8th grade. During the time I was collecting data, she and some other students in the school were featured in a local newspaper article about an art project they did at the school.

Davonte—Davonte was in Kurian’s regular level class. He sat in the back at a stand-alone desk (most of the desks are in pairs) close to LeShaun. Davonte talked a lot in class too—both as part of the official discussions and socializing with his friends. Davonte told me history and science were his favorite subjects, so he participated in those classes more than in his other classes. Davonte commuted daily from a different side of the city; he came to the school to play basketball (Mandela is a good basketball school for a school its size). He also told me he got in trouble a lot his 7th grade year, so he didn’t have a lot of options in terms of where he could go for high school.

Samantha—Samantha was in Kurian’s honors class. Her sister, Jada, was also in that class, and she had older siblings who graduated from Mandela. She went to Mandela for 7th and 8th grade as well, but she did not live close to the school. Samantha was a pretty insightful student in terms of her contributions to class discussions. She told me in our interview about her struggles juggling work and school:

Recently my mom just told me they sent a letter. Mandela sent my mom a letter saying I been missing too many days and they’re gonna kick me out, and I had to explain to my mom, I’m still getting used to this. And I know, I felt myself falling. Like I don’t, I’m not used to the Bs anymore. So when I got a B, it’s just like, what? I got a B. But the C in gym, that don’t mean nothing to me but like, um, I got a B, so I’m just like I’m not doing the best that I could do, I’m not being the best person I could be. But I’m like, I’m so tired all the time!

Antoine—Antoine was in Kurian’s regular level class. I hardly ever heard him participate in class. He sat in the front and kept to himself. He was a student I chose intentionally because he did not talk as much—I did not want to be biased towards just the students that stood out. I did

not even know his name until I asked Kurian. During our interview, however, he had no problem opening up and actually talked a great deal. Antoine was not from the neighborhood but had family that was—he was related in some way to a woman I grew up with, whose daughter was a freshman at Mandela at the time of my study.

Kendrick—Kendrick was in the regular level class. One of the first days I was there to “case the joint” there was a field trip so only about 8 students were in 3rd period, one of whom was Kendrick. I talked with the students a little bit more that day, and Kendrick was one of the more talkative/personable of those students. Kendrick did not sit close to where I would sit during class, but if he came over to the teacher’s desk to staple something or get some tissue, he would always chat with me and ask me how I was doing. Even when I was officially done collecting data and still coming back once a week to help out, Kendrick would ask me how my paper was coming. Kendrick’s attendance was not consistent, and his grades suffered because of it. He talked a lot in class, similar to Davonte—in ways both social and participating in the official class discussion. During the course of my interviews I found out Kendrick, Davonte, and LeShaun went to elementary school together, and all went to Mandela to play basketball, even though Kendrick was not on the team this year. Kendrick’s brother was shot and killed right after Thanksgiving in 2014 during the time I was there collecting data.

Luis—Luis was in the regular level class. Luis sat close to where I sat. I noticed Luis early on because he socialized a lot. He struck me as a student who probably did not even realize he was talking so much in class because the couple of times I saw Kurian ask him to be quiet, he seemed genuinely apologetic and would stop talking. Luis also had attendance issues. During our interview he commented that he hadn’t been to school on a Friday for a while. He sometimes slept in class. He was also often missing work, which made his grades suffer. A couple of times

he stayed after class on days I was there and told Mr. Joseph he was failing all his classes so he was trying to talk to his teachers about how he could bring his grade up.

LeShaun—LeShaun was in the regular level class. He sat in the back in a single desk close to Davonte. He talked with his friends a lot during class and participated much less than other students. He went to elementary school with Davonte and Kendrick and came to Mandela for basketball.

Malika—Malika was in the regular level class. She sat in the back, in front of Davonte and LeShaun. Malika and I bonded over the show *Empire*; we would briefly discuss it on Thursdays after I heard her singing a song from the show one day. Malika was relatively quiet in class—she talked sometimes to Shameka, who sat next to her, and participated every now and then in the class discussion. She told me in our interview that she was trying to get better grades than she did the previous quarter—she said it had been kind of a wake-up call for her. At the time of our interview, she told me she was on the honor roll. Malika's older siblings went to Mandela and someone in her family works in a special needs classroom at the school. She went there for 7th and 8th grade.

Jamese—Jamese was in the honors class. On the day I introduced myself officially to the class, she told me she lives next door to my mom on the same block I grew up on. She moved over there right before she started high school, which is part of the reason why she attends Mandela—she doesn't have to travel far. Jamese talked a lot in class, both participating in class discussions and talking with her friends. Jamese and Mimi were the students most vocally outraged on the day they discussed the non-indictment of Darren Wilson.

Devin—Devin was in the honors class. His grandmother was the security guard I saw every morning when I came in, and his older brother attended Mandela. Devin went there for 7th

and 8th grade also. I mistakenly thought he was from the neighborhood but he was not; he lived on the other side of the city. Devin participated a lot in class and cracked a lot of jokes in class. He played on the football team and planned on playing football in college. Devin and Jamese both asked me if I would interview them.

Tinesha—Tinesha was in the honors class. Tinesha talked a lot in class, both socially and as a participant in the class discussion. Tinesha has a twin brother who attended Mandela during their freshman year but then transferred to a different high school. Tinesha told me she lived in a predominantly Latino neighborhood, and this was the first time she attended school with mostly Black students.

Elijah—Elijah was in the regular level class. His sister, Sanaa, was in 2nd period and his cousin, Aminah, was in 3rd period as well. Elijah sat way across the room from me, so he was not a student I interacted with as much. Elijah often asked Kurian questions out of curiosity in class. For example, one day when they were discussing the Gilded Age, Elijah asked Kurian if the United States was considered the most powerful country at that time. Sometimes I would have to ask Kurian after class what was it that he was talking about with Elijah because a lot of Elijah's questions were sidebars just between the two of them. Elijah was from the neighborhood and attended Mandela for 7th and 8th grade.

Other staff. *Jin Li*—Jin's official title was curriculum coordinator at Mandela High School. He had been there since the school opened and was on the design team for the school. Jin's younger brother also taught at the school. Jin had been in his position for ten years; prior to that he was a science teacher in the middle school that existed in the building prior to Mandela (Beale Middle School). Jin was from Lakewood, and I had known him since I was a child. This was his twentieth year working in education; ten years of that was as a teacher. Jin was Chinese

American in his early 40s and was married with two sons. I had also known his wife for a long time. Jin and I used to work together in summer school programs when I was in high school and college. I decided to interview him because I wanted him to tell me about the history of the school as well as give me his perspective on teaching from an administrative position—someone who had seen a lot of teaching, including teachers who had not done such a great job with the students at Mandela. Of all the focal participants in this project, he was the one I knew the best prior to conducting my research.

Amir Chappelle—I decided to interview Amir because every single student I interviewed mentioned him by name as a teacher they really liked. Amir had been teaching at Mandela for six years; prior to that he taught math at a middle school in another neighborhood. He was the sophomore math teacher, and his room was right across the hall from Kurian's. On the days I came to Mandela to do classroom observations I would see him in the hallway before and after class and he always said hello to me. I had known Amir for about fifteen years, but not very well. He was married to a woman I grew up with. They had three sons; the oldest graduated from Mandela in 2014. Amir was Black and in his early 40s. Amir also lived in Lakewood.

John Robinson—I had an informal conversation with John after my data collection was complete, and I had already analyzed my data and started writing. There were some gaps in the stories told to me about the history of youth programs in Lakewood, so I talked to him briefly during his lunch period one day for about twenty minutes. John grew up in Lakewood; his mother was an activist in some of the same organizations as my mother and Susan (see below and chapter 4 for more details). John was a history teacher at Mandela and was one of the teachers on the design team. John and I worked together in summer school programs while I was in high school and college.

Community member interview. I interviewed Susan in order to get a little bit more detailed background information on Lakewood, the history of community organizing in Lakewood, and more details on how Mandela High School got started. Susan moved to Chicago in the early 1970s from Wisconsin, where she had also been a community organizer. She moved to Lakewood and began working with local residents who had already been organizing around issues such as access to affordable housing and police brutality. Susan ran for local office twice before her successful election as alderman of the ward, a position she occupied for over twenty years.

Data Collection Procedures

My research questions concern the construction of teacher-student relationships in classroom interactions as well as the importance of those relationships to the teachers and students. Because of this, I collected three major types of data: classroom observations and curriculum materials (i.e., classroom handouts/work), teacher and administrator interviews, and student interviews. Interviewing an administrator was not a part of my original research plan, but once in the field I realized that I needed more background information about the school as well as his views about teacher-student relationships as someone somewhat on the outside who had knowledge of different types of teachers. As mentioned above, I also interviewed an additional teacher (in addition to my focal teacher) because his name came up in every student interview I conducted. After I began my data analysis, I realized the history of organizing in Lakewood was going to be part of my findings so I interviewed a community member, Susan, to get more detailed information on that history.

I went to Mandela High School twice a week, on average, from mid-November 2014 to the end of February 2015. Prior to the start of my official data collection (mid-November) I was

“casing the joint” (Dyson & Genishi, 2005, p. 19), which I started in early October. On the days I went to Mandela I attended two class periods of Mr. Joseph’s US History class: 2nd Period, which was his honors level class, and 3rd Period, which was a regular level class (so four class periods a week most of the weeks I was there). Altogether I conducted participant observation in 42 class periods, totaling about 37 hours spent in the classroom. I sat off to the side in the classroom, near the teacher’s desk and a filing cabinet, sitting in an extra chair. I took notes in a small notebook, audio-recorded the classes, and collected copies of whatever papers were handed out to students that day. After leaving the field, I wrote field notes, doing my best to tell a story reconstructing the classes’ events using my notes and the audio-recording to jog my memory. Throughout the course of my data collection (and also my data analysis), I also wrote analytic memos. These memos served to help me get my thoughts out about things I was wondering about or questioned, or any ideas that were planted in my head while in the field, writing field notes, discussing with colleagues, trying to go to sleep, etc.

I could not always hear what every student said as part of the official class discussion, but often Kurian reiterated student comments—probably to make sure everyone heard what they said. Sometimes I noticed Kurian having a quiet side conversation with a student that I could not hear, and I would ask him about it during 4th period (his lunch). For example, one day I heard Kurian joking with a group of boys about Valentine’s Day dates and Chipotle. I asked Kurian to recollect the conversation during 4th period, and then I took note of what he said and added it into my field notes for the day. Because my research questions are about teacher-student relationships, I disciplined my attention in the classroom to the things that were happening in relationship to the teacher; that is, I did not pay attention to side conversations except at times when I noted that in general, there were side conversations happening (which was all the time!

High school students are very social). I generally did not participate in those classes, with several exceptions—there were a couple times where I jumped in to say something or Kurian asked me if I knew something he was unsure about. During class, I also gathered any handouts that were passed out to students (e.g., graphic organizers, text excerpts).

I interviewed the focal students in groups of two. My rationale behind this was that it would allow me to interview more students in less time, and also so students could build on each other's comments in conversation. I did not want to interview more than two students at a time because I thought it would make transcribing the interviews much more difficult in terms of simultaneous talk and being able to distinguish who was speaking when. I interviewed students during their lunch period in the classroom of a different teacher, who had lunch during that time and therefore was not in the room. The length of student interviews ranged between 30 and 45 minutes. I conducted six student interviews, with twelve students altogether. The interviewees were all sophomores; seven boys and five girls; five students were from the honors class and seven students were from the regular class.

I conducted three interviews with Kurian that were each about an hour long. We met after school in his room or another empty classroom. Our decision about where we would meet depended on where we were least likely to be interrupted by students. Those interviews were semi-structured in that I had questions that I planned on asking him, but I also let the conversation take a natural course as well as asked additional questions based on the things that were said. This was also the case with my administrative interview and my additional teacher interview. I conducted one interview with a school administrator, Mr. Li, during the school day in a conference room off of the main office. The interview was just over an hour, not counting the times we paused the interview because issues came up that he had to go deal with quickly. I

also interviewed the sophomore math teacher, Amir Chappelle in his classroom after the students left during a testing day. That interview lasted just over 40 minutes. I interviewed Susan on a Saturday afternoon at her house. That interview lasted about an hour and a half. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed.

Data Analysis

I applied grounded theory methods to my data analysis (Emerson, et al., 1995; Charmaz, 2010), meaning that I approached my initial analysis with no pre-set list of codes or themes. I attempted to “build ideas inductively” and tried to avoid “imposing extant theories or our own beliefs on the data” (Charmaz, 2010, p. 187). Many traditional interpretations of grounded theory “treat sets of already collected fieldnote data as unproblematic starting points; they implicitly assume that such fieldnotes can be analyzed independently of the analytic processes and theoretical commitments of the ethnographer who wrote them” (Emerson et al., p. 144). This is not what I attempted to do. Rather, I understand that my field notes are not “pure” and that my interview transcripts are responses to questions that I asked. My own perspective and ongoing analysis has been present in all stages of research.

I began my data analysis by reading over my entire corpus of data (field notes, interview transcripts), making notes in the margins as a way of trying to figure out what was happening. My goal in open coding was “to remain attuned to our subjects’ views of their realities” (Charmaz, 2010, p. 187). I first employed line-by-line coding in that I tried to code each chunk of data without thinking too much about how things connected to each other or to bigger themes (Saldaña, 2013). I kept a code list. Once I went through my initial coding and wrote more analytic memos, I tried to look over my codes and see how things related and what things might be collapsed. From my collapsed codes I tested out a couple of assertions, writing vignettes and

looking for data that would support or complicate my assertions (Erickson, 1986). I went through cycles of moving from my data to larger ideas and codes, and from those themes back down through my data. I wrote analytic memos throughout this process. I would move back and forth from my classroom field notes to my interview transcripts asking myself questions like how are the things participants said in interviews supported (or not) by the things that happened in the classroom? I used my research questions to guide my process of testing out assertions and searching back through my data. For example, I noticed that students said a lot to me about their views on teacher authority/exertion of power, but I had to figure out how that related to other themes in this larger discussion of teacher-student relationships and what things matter to students. (See table 3.3)

Table 3.3—Data Collection Procedures and Analysis

Data Source	Data Collection Procedures	Frequency/Quantity	Description of Data for Analysis
Classroom Observations	Field notes; audio recordings; collection of student handouts (e.g., graphic organizers, short text, questions to go with movies)	2 days per week/4 hours per week/3.5 months, totaling 42 class periods and about 37 hours	Audio recordings were taken of classes as well as jottings which were later turned into field notes. The audio recordings helped me flesh out the written field notes, including transcribing where necessary. Attention was focused on classroom interactions that centered around the teacher (e.g., I did not pay attention to side conversations between students—of which there were many).
Interviews with Kurian	Audio recordings and transcriptions	3 interviews/about an hour each interview	My interviews with Kurian included questions about his life story/background, his teaching philosophies and

Table 3.3—Data Collection Procedures and Analysis (continued)

Data Source	Data Collection Procedures	Frequency/Quantity	Description of Data for Analysis
			his thoughts about his curriculum and his relationships with his students. Some of the interviews were spent member-checking (i.e., asking him his take on things I was noticing).
Interviews with students	Audio recordings and transcriptions	6 interviews/12 students/about 45 minutes per interview	Students and I met in groups of 2 during their lunch periods. The interviews were open-ended and involved me asking them about the kinds of teachers they like and don't like and how important they thought it was to have relationships with their students.
Interviews with other faculty/community members	Audio recordings and transcriptions	3 interviews/1 teacher/1 curriculum coordinator/1 former local elected official	Interviews with additional adults were held in order to get more information about things I was noticing and things other participants talked about.

Role of the Researcher

Teacher identity. My role at Mandela High School was complex, in two main ways. One was my dual role in the classroom as a researcher and someone with teaching experience. I also was formerly employed in Chicago Public Schools as a teacher—but not at Mandela. During 2nd and 3rd period, when I was officially doing my observations, I maintained a more passive role in class. Sometimes Mr. Joseph would ask me a question (generally a factual one; for example one day we were talking about the Marissa Alexander³ case and he asked me if I knew when she was going to be released from prison because he didn't know). Most of the time I sat off to the side in

³ Marissa Alexander is a survivor of domestic violence who received a 20-year sentence for firing a warning shot after her husband attacked her and threatened to kill her. She was released on January 27, 2015.

a chair close to his desk, but not sitting behind his desk. As I got to know the kids more, sometimes I would say little things to the ones that sat closest to me, or I would sometimes give a “teacher look” when students were talking and I could catch the eye of one I knew a little better. Most days I just sat and wrote notes, however.

I think my presence in the school and the classroom felt like a teacher presence as opposed to being neutral or one who was trying to “get in” with the kids. Some students thought I was there in some kind of student teacher capacity, even after I explained myself. All of the people I knew were staff—I didn’t know any of the students coming in (although I did grow up with some of their parents). I think the students were quicker to be comfortable with me, however, because so many of their teachers knew who I was. Occasionally I would go say hello to Ms. Cline and Mr. Robinson during a passing period on my way out of the building, and I would see some of the same students and get to talk with them. Sometimes I had quick conversations with students in 2nd and 3rd period before or after class. I tried to be non-intrusive in interactions with students—I smiled and said hello to students a lot and listened and asked questions. Those very small interactions accumulated over time. In our interview, Tinesha talked about how teachers get to know their students, and she commented that I had learned a lot about them from sitting in class watching them, which was definitely true—I knew a lot more about them than they did about me.

I gave all the students I interviewed a chance to ask me any questions, and Devin asked why I was so different from my mom. I pressed him to be specific, and he said we talk so differently. I have noticed before that Black students respond to me when they hear me talk—I think they experience a little bit of cognitive dissonance because they think I don’t talk the way they think I’m supposed to. On several occasions I have had students turn around in surprise

when I first speak with them or even comment to me that “I don’t sound white.” One of the girls in 2nd period asked me very politely one day “Do you hang out with a lot of African American people?” I am not trying to describe these things as if I have some sort of badge of honor or “pass” among Black students; rather I think students perceive me as someone who has some capital that they value. I think all these things together—I knew their teachers, they thought I was “cool,” I was from the neighborhood, I was friendly—all made it easier for them to accept me as part of their landscape and be comfortable letting me interview them. In January, I wasn’t there for a while because of finals and the fact that school was closed due to cold temperatures. When I came back, a couple of students said things to me like “where you been?” While my primary objective was not to get “in” with students, I think I was able to become familiar enough with them that they welcomed me into their classroom, and they were comfortable letting me interview them.

Most of the days I came to collect data I would stay for 4th period (Kurian’s lunch period) and chat with him (off the record), and then help co-teach 5th period, another section of regular level US History. He expressed to me at the beginning of the year that this was his toughest class—he felt like it was more difficult to get things accomplished in that class because students talked more and did not respond to his redirection as much. He also told me that due to scheduling or chance there were more students in 5th period who were taking the class for a second time (because they had failed the first time). He told me 5th period also had a larger share of students who were in trouble regularly in (and out) of school compared to his other classes. He told me at the beginning of my data collection that he would be happy to take any help I could offer, so this was my way to be of some help since he was helping me so much by allowing me into his classroom and giving me his time.

During 4th period we would talk casually, but he would also ask for my input on his lessons (he generally taught the same lesson 2nd, 3rd and 5th period). The feedback that I gave him almost always related to literacy specific strategies as well as suggestions for structuring participation in class. For example, in one lesson they looked at a chart together that showed income distributions across the population in the United States. I suggested he give them the chart and let them sit and digest it for a while before he started explaining/analyzing it for them.

We talked a lot about ways he could spend less of the class period in a whole class format. One particular day during 3rd period the students were working on completing a graphic organizer for an essay, and the class was being very talkative. Kurian had to stop several times and tell them to be quiet and talk to them about the importance of doing well on the assignment (in a loud and seemingly frustrated tone). During 4th period that day, I asked him what he thought he would lose by letting them do more of the steps on their own so he would not have to command their attention for so much of the class. He explained there were some students in the class who would have trouble completing the work without the scaffolding he provided in the whole class format, and we discussed some ways he could structure the lesson a little differently. I did not ever try to make it seem like I had the answer or the way to do something, I tried to ask questions and offer up other ways to possibly do something. I could see that he incorporated some of my suggestions in 2nd and 3rd period classes on other days when I would be there. He told me he thought a lot about my suggestions related to letting the students do more on their own and being okay with giving up control. In that capacity, I was acting as another set of teacher eyes in the room. I told him someone could probably come in my classroom when I was teaching and make the same suggestions to me; it's just harder to look at your own teaching like that. I never gave him suggestions on things to change about the content, however. When I co-

taught during 5th period, sometimes we would decide I could explain a certain segment of the lesson or I would walk around and help kids while he explained something or while they were working on something. After my data collection came to an official end, I continued going up to the school once a week to help him out during 2nd and 3rd periods. In that capacity I was just an extra (knowledgeable) body in the class since I didn't co-plan with him or even know ahead of time what they would be working on. For example, they were working on a writing project a couple days I was there, and Kurian and I both moved around the class helping students with their graphic organizers/pre-writing.

During the period of my data collection I also was visible in the school in a couple other ways, which meant the students in Mr. Joseph's class had an opportunity to see me outside of class. I helped teachers and students wrap Christmas gifts for kids at a local homeless shelter one day after school. I attended one of their big basketball games. I attended their school-wide Black History Month assembly and took score for the trivia game they played. I helped chaperone a group of seniors to go vote in the municipal elections. Students in a Civics class interviewed me as part of a unit on the history of Lakewood. I chose to do these things as a way to serve the school community. They were giving me a lot by allowing me access to the space, and in the instance of my interviewees, giving of their time as well. I also consider myself a part of the school community, which is the next major way my role at the school is/was complicated.

Community connections. I will be talking about this more in the next chapter, but I have a long history with the school building, many of the staff members at the school, and the community. I grew up in Lakewood and attended middle school in the building in which the school now exists. I have known about a quarter of the other teachers and faculty in the school for most of my life. I did my early research paper (required for my doctoral program) with

another teacher in that school, and I also worked with several of the teachers and administrators in a summer school program I taught in while I was in high school and college, although not my participating teacher. My mother⁴ also teaches at the school and was one of the people on the design team for that school, along with two teachers I have known since I was a child. I tell people all the time that I grew up in a community of educators—most of that community teaches at Mandela. I'm the one who left to go teach elsewhere.

My connections with the school community definitely allow me a special kind of access to the site. I felt much more comfortable moving around the building than I would at any other school in which I did not work. Mr. Robinson would let me use his classroom to interview students because he had lunch during the same time and would just go elsewhere. One day he was absent and I had to try and find a way to unlock his door. I asked a security guard whom I didn't know if he would unlock the door for me. He teased me a little bit about whether or not I was trustworthy and I assured him it was fine, and then told him my first and last name—purposefully, so he would know I was connected to the space via my mother. He was immediately allayed of any concerns and unlocked the door for me. It was also easy for me to interview additional teachers because there was already an established rapport.

I have thought a lot about my insider/outsider status at Mandela High School. I do not want to erase the ways in which I am definitely an outsider. As a graduate student, I represent an outside institution, and this comes with power and privilege. My participants (e.g., Kurian, the

⁴ None of my research directly involved my mother. The students mentioned my mother as one of the teachers they talked about during interviews—I gave her a pseudonym for those instances (when the talk was specifically relevant to her being my mother I will not use a pseudonym, because I'm not trying to erase her from the school). I also decided to have the students call me Karla (or Ms. Karla) rather than by the same name as one of their teachers. Once students found out I was her daughter some of them called me by my last name (mostly because they thought it was funny).

students, other teachers in the school) trust me to represent them on paper and that is a huge responsibility. Villenas (1996) writes:

“This story is an attempt to untangle my own multiplicity of identities played out in the terrains of privilege and power in ethnographic research. With the new generation of "native" ethnographers, including myself, increasingly working within and writing about our own communities, we are beginning to question how our histories and identities are entangled in the workings of domination as we engage the oppressive discourses of ‘othering.’” (p. 359)

One of the things Villenas is referring to is her identity as a Latina studying in a Latina community—she wrote about “native” ethnographers in the sense of researchers who come from so-called marginalized communities, specifically racially marginalized. I do not intend to downplay my privileged position as a white, middle class graduate student. My insider status is connected to different aspects of my identity: my identity as a teacher and a community member. All aspects of one’s identity do not carry equal status in society—the ways I identify as an insider do not reflect any sense of shared marginal status. Also, my insider status is considered with respect to the other teachers at Mandela, not the students. With the students I was an outsider in most ways—unfamiliar, white, from a university, and older. What mitigated my outsider status with them was that several of their teachers (whom they generally liked) knew me, which I’m sure helped the students feel more comfortable around me compared to if I would have been a stranger to everyone in the building.

I feel a part of the “we” that exists at the school, which certainly affected my movement in the school as well as every aspect of my research from data collection to writing. I think this is an important story to tell—and in many ways I feel like I am doing service to a community that

shaped me in important ways. While my role as “insider” definitely limits my perception, all of our perception is limited in some way(s). I believe it helps that I have worked in many different school buildings, so I have a keen sense of the different dynamics that exist in different buildings. It is possible in any research project to spend enough time at your site(s) that you start to feel part of the “we,” but I recognize that my circumstances are slightly different. I am not aiming for neutrality—what I am aiming to do is describe the way my participants experience and understand their world.

Conclusion

I designed this study to find out both what happens in a classroom and how these issues matter to my participants (students and teachers). Because of this goal, ethnographic methods (e.g., classroom observations and open-ended interviews) were the best choice for my research design. I am also emphasizing that my participants are navigating a particular context (e.g., the school, the community, the city, the current time, individual experiences) and thus the interactions of the people in these contexts make this story unique (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Dyson & Genishi, 2005). In the next three chapters I will discuss my findings. I have done my best to organize my themes “into a coherent ‘story’ about life and events” at Mandela High School (Emerson et al., 1995, p. 170). I will begin with a discussion of some of the history of Lakewood, Mandela High School, the high school’s founders, and Kurian, and the ways that history is relevant to this research.

Chapter 4

“Mandela is Like a Family:” Community Connections and Political Activism

“Mandela got something going on for years . . . Teachers [at other schools] could have just had that for five years, six years. They been having it for like twenty to thirty.” – Devin, 10th grade student, in interview

Mandela High School is a relatively new school; it has only been in existence for ten years. There are 6 teachers who have been there the entire 10 years. The beginning of the school is not the beginning of the story, however. The school is part of a 40-year fight in Lakewood for affordable housing, programs for young people, and access to healthcare and other services, including quality education. In this chapter I discuss aspects of the history of Lakewood, focused particularly on struggles for affordable housing and the development of programs for young people in the community. I connect this history with the development of Kurian’s political beliefs and, more broadly, how having a critical consciousness fundamentally informs the practice of teaching.

I am arguing in this chapter that Kurian Joseph came to teaching as an activist, as did the teachers who founded Mandela High School. This makes a difference in terms of how they designed and enacted curriculum as well as how they interacted with students, and also, their beliefs about their roles in school vis-à-vis their students. Although Kurian did not grow up in Lakewood nor did he share the same type of activist background as the founding teachers, he still started teaching with many of the same beliefs and with the similar idea that teaching was a way to work towards a more socially just world.

Some of the story of the history of Lakewood involves me as well. I grew up in Lakewood and I participated in some of the programs I discuss in this chapter. I am not trying to erase myself from the context so I include myself in places where I share in the history. This

chapter thus includes my own development as a critically conscious person alongside the people I grew up with in Lakewood—some of whom now teach at Mandela. In my opening quote, Devin talked about how teachers at Mandela have had something going on for twenty or thirty years, meaning they have a history of working together that predates the existence of Mandela High School. When John (one of the founders of Mandela High School) and I talked about this, he made the point that it is important to know that we are friends. He said, “You can’t separate some of that stuff. Longtime friends, we know each other’s strengths and weaknesses . . . there’s a huge amount of respect for each other. A HUGE amount of respect.” This is an important point to make because for many people there is a separation between people’s personal and professional lives. But those separations have never existed among this group of people in Lakewood. John told me, “I don’t know how you write that down . . . It’s bigger—those words don’t fit our experience with each other.”

Lakewood: Gentrification, Community Organizing and Youth Programs

When I met with Jin Li (curriculum coordinator at Mandela, also one of the school’s founders) he gave me some background on Lakewood and Mandela. I realized that the context was going to be an important part of my discussion so I also met with Susan to talk in more detail. Susan is a longtime resident of Lakewood and was alderman for over twenty years. Susan explained to me why Lakewood is and was a unique neighborhood in Chicago. Susan moved to Chicago in 1972 and told me that when she got here Lakewood had the largest concentration of poor white people of anywhere in the country, the largest concentration of Native Americans in the country anywhere outside a reservation, and the largest population of African Americans in Chicago outside of what was considered Chicago’s Black Belt. As discussed in the previous

chapter, although Chicago is a city with entrenched racial segregation, Lakewood was an exception to that.

Susan talked about how both Black and white residents in Lakewood had already been organizing when she moved here.

They began doing a lot of organizing together. One of the younger guys was doing a lot of organizing with the Young Patriots. There are lots of people writing about this stuff. JOIN [Jobs or Income Now], which was an SDS [Students for a Democratic Society] group, which I was a part of in college, came to Lakewood. I got here in '72 and these folks had been organizing already. The Young Patriots had formed a coalition with the Young Lords and the Black Panther Party. So when people talk about the original Rainbow Coalition, that's what that was. All three of them had several things in common. They were actively engaged in demonstrations against police brutality. They had all set up free health centers. And they all had various other survival programs and were organizing their community And they all started with entities that were gangs and became political organizations. The Black Panthers didn't start as a gang, so that's not true. But they were all treated as if they were gangs by the media and they drew from young people who were marginalized by the city and decided that, rather than join a gang, they were gonna do political organizing. Sorry, just trying to get that clear.

Lakewood has a long history of residents organizing for various reasons. Poor people formed coalitions to fight for services and housing, and Susan was clear that she joined things that were already happening. My parents moved here in 1978 (before I was born) and just happened to move to Lakewood (my father was attending law school in Chicago) and similarly got involved in the organizing that was already happening.

The point was there were so many people doing so many different things here. So basically what I've learned is they were phasing out as we were phasing in. And we were connected with some of the same people We had a formal relationship of sorts with the Black Panther Party. They declared and we agreed that we would work under the direction of the Black Panther Party. We sold Black Panther papers, but we also put our own publications together. And established our responsibility and our goal was to organize white people against racism. And to be part of what we were sure was going to be the revolution. So everything was survival pending revolution. The focus was really building and growing and developing through survival programs. It really was a concept that this was something people did for themselves. This was not about charity. This was, we organized programs that created a structure that we could do for ourselves within that through a coalition of people that we needed help from because, you know, they had more resources or better experience obviously. You know if we needed a doctor we had to find a doctor for instance. And so the health centers operated largely by community folks in collaboration and cooperation with health professionals. And that was pretty much true for everything, in whatever way made sense.

The context in the 1970s was very specific—this was organizing happening on the heels of the Civil Rights movement and during the height of the Black Power and Student movements. Susan, along with my parents and many other people, were involved in organizing in Lakewood where their goal was to organize poor white people under the premise that the struggles were the same and coalition building would be beneficial to everyone.

Affordable housing and gentrification. One important part of the organizing that happened (and is still happening) in Lakewood is around affordable housing. Another longtime

resident and activist told me that whereas most neighborhoods in the city were protesting public housing being built in their communities, the residents of Lakewood were demanding it.

Lakewood residents have been trying to slow down the development of market rate housing in the neighborhood and fight for housing for poor people. Susan explained to me that Lakewood was home to over 3,000 units of buildings built in the 1960s and 1970s with financing from the federal Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). The building of these units was important because the developers got a huge deal on financing from the government if they agreed to keep some of their units affordable through Section 8. These buildings were built all over the country, but the first one in the country was built in Lakewood. Between these units and public housing built by the Chicago Housing Authority (CHA), there was a significant presence of affordable housing in Lakewood.

Susan went on to explain to me that people did not pay attention to certain details when the HUD contracts were made. There was an option for a buyout from the developers after twenty years. So because the first building was built in Lakewood, it was also the first one to meet the twenty-year deadline. The developers of the building declared that they were going to go market (i.e., no longer keep any of the units affordable). Susan said, “And there was nothing we could do but organize. And because of that organizing, Congress began a series of affordable housing acts.” Interestingly, some of the buildings that were built through this program were also buildings that served senior citizens in majority Republican districts. This is an example of interest convergence; the Congressional acts were passed because they benefitted those in power as well (Bell, 2004). The politicians in those districts needed to preserve the senior housing so they had to support the changes to the laws and that helped get the laws passed that also

protected affordable housing for poor people. As Susan stated, “Otherwise, if it just would have been for poor people and families, forget it.”

This context is important—there are struggles all over the country about who has rights to a space, especially when it comes to market forces versus longtime residents when those residents happen to be poor. When I was very young (in the mid-1980s) I remember having to move a lot because the buildings we lived in were being sold and turned into condominiums. By the mid-1990s many of my friends had moved out of the neighborhood (and in some cases out of the city altogether) because of the lack of affordable housing options. The residents of Lakewood and in many other places have not been passive in this, however.

This is just one example of many fronts in which the battle over affordable housing has been waged in Lakewood. There were sit-ins done to get public housing built in the neighborhood. Developers set fire to their buildings (while residents still lived there) to get out of keeping affordable units. There have been court cases won to keep housing affordable (rather than market rate) in Lakewood. There have been political battles over city land and how it should be used. Not all of these battles have been won, however. Lakewood has been gentrified to a great extent; many of the buildings my friends lived in are now condominiums. These battles are also not unique to Lakewood. They have happened all over Chicago, notably in communities where high rise public housing has been demolished in the last fifteen years, and units have not been replaced as promised.

This background is important also because it explains the context in which the school exists. I discuss next the specific background of the fight for youth programs and quality public education in Lakewood, but the broader context just discussed is also relevant. A core group of teachers at Mandela High School, including but not limited to my mother, have been involved

(either directly or indirectly) in organizing around affordable housing in Lakewood long before they became teachers. This matters because it reveals a long and deep commitment to issues of social justice in systemic inequalities. Many of us were raised in this context, where our parents were completely entrenched in activism. As Jin told me, “all of us, we still talk with that fire, and the reason why we can still spit the game like we’re doing right now is because it was kind of ground into us.” I had a conversation with John Robinson (one of the other founding teachers of Mandela, along with Jin and my mother) about how those of us whose parents were activists (including he and I) were looking for a way to live out those same ideals but with a decent career (as opposed to our parents who struggled financially when we were growing up). John said teaching “was kind of our way to be socially active.” He continued, “we ain’t knocking on doors and trying to get people to fight this issue on land or housing.” We have been raised to believe the point of life is to work for justice, and that is part of what we bring with us to the classroom.

Youth programs. One of the things I thought about when I was collecting my data was the presence of male teachers. Even though high schools generally have more male teachers compared to elementary schools, it still made me wonder: Why is it that I specifically know so many men who became teachers? I asked Susan about this, and she said it was because all of it stemmed from sports. As Jin said, in the process of participating in this activism in Lakewood, this group of people “raised a bunch of conscious young people in the neighborhood.” During the 1980s some of those young people (teenage boys) would organize pick-up games of softball and football—most of which took place on an empty field (just grass—no bases, no regulation size, just an open field). Susan told me, “It was the way that those guys stayed away from the gangs in Lakewood, which were largely racially organized. It was their rejection of that. And their—that was their alternative, sports.”

John explained that through their participation in camps and organized sports at other nearby parks, he and his brothers got exposure to what more organized leagues looked like. He said that in our part of Lakewood, we did not have any parks so the only option was to set up little unofficial games. He said there were no organized sports to sign up for in the neighborhood, and for different reasons (gang boundaries, lack of transportation), many kids could not travel to parks that were even right in the eastern part of Lakewood or other nearby neighborhoods. John told me, “Then as we got older we got involved in Park District stuff . . . Then we signed up for things for high school. Then you get a better idea of how to organize things through high school.” John explained that he and his peers (other guys from the neighborhood) had the experience of participating in organized sports both during high school and then when they went away to college, opportunities that were not available to them or any other young people without leaving the neighborhood.

Then we came back, and we’re like okay now we know something. We know how to talk to people we know how to express ourselves, we know how to communicate things, we know how to talk to parents, how to recruit kids. Let’s recruit them around sports. Let’s give them the same experience we had, but in a formal way. Like we’re gonna actually join—we’re gonna go to the parks and say we want a football team, we want the softball diamonds. We want to organize a basketball tournament. Through the park and school.

We did that, and that turned out to be really good.

John discussed how the push for organized sports grew out of their desire to have something to do, and then once they got some experience with high school sports they brought their knowledge back to the neighborhood. They (John, Jin, Susan’s son, and other young men) wanted to help organize sports programs so the younger people in the neighborhood would have

something productive to do. Timing is also very important in this history because that started during the late 1980s, and Susan was the alderman. She said, “Once we got access through the alderman’s office, we had access to the fields and stuff, we really expanded.” Susan was able to fight to get facilities opened up for community use.

During the late 80s all the way through the late 90s there were sports programs to participate in for young people in Lakewood. This was due to young people like John and Jin who came back from college wanting to organize and coach teams. Susan was able to mobilize resources through the alderman’s office in terms of facilities and money. During the summers, there was a huge softball league. I recall going out to the park all day on Saturdays for a tournament of games, and all the participants would also get fed. At its height, there were enough coaches and participants for approximately 12 different teams. It felt like a big community event every Saturday during those summers. There were also basketball tournaments, and eventually there were volleyball leagues and a football team also.

John said going into the schools was just a natural progression from the sports programs. Out of the summer sports leagues grew an idea for a summer school program—Reach Higher. The premise of this program was that college students from the community would work as teachers for the students at Beale Middle School (the school that later changed to what became Mandela High School). The program was geared towards incoming 6th, 7th, and 8th graders and high school students also worked as helpers. The philosophy behind Reach Higher was to have examples for the younger students of people from the community who were in college. But also, they felt that as college students from the community, they could connect to the students well because they were younger than regular teachers as well as from the same community. Reach

Higher also was designed to orient incoming 6th graders to Beale Middle School so they were familiar with the school and other students by the time the school year started.

I asked John if he knew he wanted to be a teacher when he started working at Reach Higher. He said no, he just wanted a job and to be around kids. According to John,

We were just trying to play sports. But it made sense to take that experience and say okay, let's do that. And then you find out you like working with kids and then you find out you're actually good at it, so it made sense to be like okay, is there I job I can do? And everybody was kind of like, okay gym teacher, right? That didn't float with a lot of people but, I mean, the teaching did. Then we kind of jumped into it. Cuz it would allow us to do these types of things. Cuz right when we started teaching we were the coaches of the teams or we would coordinate the after school programs in those schools. But you know that. And I think what you said is kind of important, a critical understanding before we became teachers. About kids, about education, about opportunities, resources, like that was already embedded in us before we even took a teacher course or passed a certification test.

I worked in Reach Higher for two summers while I was in high school, and while I was in college. My experience was similar: I did not immediately know I wanted to be a teacher, I just knew I wanted to do something community-oriented that would (ideally) help create a more just world. Through working in Reach Higher, I was able to have a teaching experience and see that maybe this was a way I could have a career and still feel like I was doing good work, largely because of this critical consciousness that I was raised with. John and I talked about this.

Karla: My fight has to look like something different.

John: Right. And it has to be tailored to your life versus, well that's the fight and I gotta go get in it. And maybe that's how we've become like watered down We stay in academics, we stay in our own little worlds. I mean, our world can be tough. This is hard. What you do is hard. But it's like you know there's stuff way harder than this. There's all kind of people doing stuff without a check, without insurance, without, just because they know it needs to be done

Karla: Right. Like what our parents did (laughing).

John: Right. You're crazy, I'm not doing that. I'm not doing that. So you know, it comes to—and I'm okay with that. I buried that. Not that I did that well either. Being out talking to people, nah, we didn't really do that. I mean, we believed in it and we like—but it helped us with our consciousness.

Mandela High School: The Fight for a Community School

After working in the youth programs, this group of young people who were going to college or just getting out of college decided they could go into education. Among that group were John Robinson and Jin Li, who later would become two of the three founders of Mandela High School, along with my mother. Jin and I talked about some of the activism I described earlier in this section in our interview, and I was struck by this connection between the programs we had participated in growing up and our entrance into teaching as a career. I asked Jin what he thought about the relationship between our participation in various kinds of activism and teaching.

Jin: That definitely has a major influence on why these, including myself, why a bunch of us went into teaching. We can change things. We saw all this injustice. We were on fire teaching these things, we wanted to teach in our neighborhood schools.

Karla: Right.

Jin: I think also it was a conscious idea, we gotta have a career. We gotta be professionals. There are no more of these other kind of jobs [organizing jobs].

Karla: Right.

Jin: So it was like okay, we can legitimize ourselves in a field where we can do good.

In the mid-1990s John, Jin, and my mother enrolled in a city program for alternative teacher certification. Jin and John were starting careers out of college and my mother was transitioning from almost twenty years as an organizer to a second career as a teacher. John and my mother started teaching in one of the neighborhood elementary schools (the one John, myself, Susan's son, and many others had attended) and Jin started teaching at Beale—the middle school that later turned into Mandela. Jin said that their activities in the community—the summer school programs, the coaching—made them think, “Man, I can't wait to have my own classroom!” They felt like the teachers, by and large, were not doing a good job teaching the kids in the community—they were disconnected, not invested in the same ways, and teaching an irrelevant or outdated curriculum.

Susan told me about those early years when they first started teaching. At that point she was the alderman, so while not directly involved in education she had some power to influence decision-makers both at the local schools and on the city level. She had already been working for several years on resources for the summer programs at this point also.

And based on the experience that was particularly sharp in your mom and John's experience at [the elementary school], which was how we really came up with this.

Because every time I talked to them, especially John, it was really these heart-wrenching stories about kids that we all knew that they had really been able to impact over the

course of the year who, over the course of the next year, completely reverted. And it was the notion of what impact could you possibly have if you had them for one year after another after another, and maybe that's what we could actually do at Beale. So that's where the idea came for the middle school program that Jin and your mom and John got involved in. But that came after.

Susan talked about how they felt that although they were having an impact on the kids, just one year was not enough to really make significant changes in the students' overall experience with schooling. John, Jin, and my mother were teaching in isolation and started to think about the greater impact they could have if they had their own group of kids that they kept for multiple years. Susan said she started talking to Paul Vallas, who was then the superintendent of Chicago Public Schools, about this plan to get multiple positions open at Beale Middle School, so they could all move there and teach a team of kids from 6th to 8th grade.

Jin and I talked about this same time period.

Jin: Your mom and John were at [the elementary school] and I was at Beale. They taught there for a few years and I taught at Beale for a couple years and I think after my second year—Beale even twenty years ago was facing a gentrification crisis, cuz they were losing kids. So I was let go cuz I was the youngest. So I went to another school. By the time—two, three, four years later? Susan was able to try to get us all together at Beale to make our own team.

Karla: Ohhhhh, okay.

Jin: They had an opening, we got your mom, John, and myself into three openings and we formed a team.

Karla: Right. Did you guys all come at the same time?

Jin: Yes.

Karla: Okay.

Jin: So, it created a little animosity with the current staff, we were supposed to be the golden child, the team, so they put us there. Because Beale, you know, sagging scores, low enrollment, that kind of thing.

Karla: Mmm hmmm.

Jin: So we taught. And that's how it started. We taught together. And the team. I mean, you got three people who pretty much grew up together, lived in the same neighborhood, had the same common goals, same political bent and focus and everything. We kept our own data, our kids was our community, we practiced a lot of stuff that we felt like worked. Good literature, literature that connected to them. Wrap-around services—not the traditional sense of psychology, social work—just that from one classroom to another you have a consistent message and consistent support in that you will be taken care of if you just stay in here.

The way they organized their team was Jin taught science, John taught social studies, and my mom taught math. Then they all taught reading to their homerooms. They read novels with their students, and as Jin mentioned, purposefully chose literature that was relevant and engaging (in contrast with using anthologies and focusing on skills, which was the dominant practice at Beale). They had been brought in through political pressure from Susan and my mom had also been a member of Beale's Local School Council—all of this contributed to tensions between them and the other teachers in the school. The other teachers probably felt like they were being invaded whereas the three of them felt like they were bringing something good into a building that had been a disservice to students for years. It did not help the tension that their students got

much better test scores than the other students in the building. Susan told me, “They did so well the school didn’t go into probation.”

Beale Middle School did not have the best reputation in the community. I attended Beale in the early 1990s (before any of them started working there) and not many kids from my elementary school went with me. Beale is in the east part of Lakewood. Beale was known for being dangerous—lots of gang-related fights in and around the school. For many students who lived in my part of Lakewood (farther west) going to Beale also meant walking across gang territories. This was not an issue for me (a white female), but it was and still is a real concern for many Lakewood residents. When I was doing my data collection this year Kurian was doing a unit on the history of activism in Lakewood with his civics class, and he was not able to go on community tours like he wanted because there were so many students who could not walk to or in the west part of Lakewood. So, back then many parents did not want to send their kids to Beale because of safety concerns AND because it was not a great school, education-wise, either.

During the time they were all teaching at Beale Middle School Jin and my mother also wrote a proposal for a National Middle School Association award—the Making a Difference award. (It has since changed its name to the Association for Middle Level Education.) They ended up winning the award, and Jin said, “we basically just wrote what we did in the classroom . . . And that kind of gave us the impetus, like maybe we CAN do this . . . that kind of spring boarded us into the confidence of writing the proposal for Mandela.”

The way the school eventually went from Beale Middle School to Mandela High School was through a combination of system-wide changes in Chicago Public Schools and political influence. Susan talked about all the different ways people worked to exert political pressure.

She talked about how changes in administration at Beale meant the things that they were agreed upon later did not happen. She told me,

Everything was a fight. But because I was the alderman I was able to create some buffer and support . . . After they got through the first set of kids and to the second that I started having serious conversations with the board about doing something with the school. It wasn't until they were, another year or so, that we started, the opening of the Renaissance 2010 gave us a way to do it The dynamic of the board is that the people who were doing 2010 were all surrogates for the charter school movement.

A history of the proliferation of charter schools in Chicago is outside the scope of this paper, but the relevant part is that the Renaissance 2010 plan was initiated by CPS that year and understood by many people in education to be a way to get more charter schools in Chicago even though that was not the explicitly stated goal. So John, Jin, and my mom, along with Susan exerting her resources, figured that this was an opportunity to use Renaissance 2010 as a way to get their proposal through—as a neighborhood, non-charter school.

Susan explained to me that when they thought they could use Renaissance 2010 “as a vehicle to start a new school” they ended up being in competition with charter schools over the space—there were competing proposals. The proposal that was written by Jin, John, and my mother ended up being in competition with proposals submitted by Charter Management Organizations—organizations that had multiple schools in the city and were looking to expand. They set up an advisory council to vote on the proposals. Susan recalled,

They put together this advisory council of which I was only one member. I didn't even know half the people on there. It turns out I was able to organize the people but largely because they organized themselves. When they saw Jin, John, and your mom teach, that's

what gave them the school. No one else would let them see as much as they did, they were completely transparent. And we, the two other schools, one of them wouldn't let us just go into the classrooms, they had a prepared thing for us and the other one was sophomore students doing something similar, they were an English class reading a similar topic book But the way Beale did it was that they each had their specialty they taught but they collectively taught reading with a theme. So we went to all their classes with the book so we could see how they were each focusing on the book differently, but with the same thing. And the book had something to do with race, as did the one at the charter school in the sophomore class. The students at Beale . . . were at a higher level of discussion than the sophomores in the honors class at the high school. And that did it for everyone on the transition team except for the one person who was on the board for the other charter school.

The proposal for Mandela was accepted. Immediately there were bumps in the road, however. Jin reminded me that not only were they all teachers (no administrative experience), but they were also all middle school teachers. None of them had high school experience. Jin explained that originally they wanted it to stay a middle school. All the neighborhood elementary schools were kindergarten through 5th grade. He thought they would continue to get those students like Beale had been since it opened. "But the Board [of Education] said no, we want you to be a high school." Mandela High School opened as a 6th-9th grade school and the plan was to add a year every year until it was 6th-12th grade. At the same time, however, the local elementary schools went back to a K-8 model, so from the outset there was difficulty in recruiting students. Susan talked about how this is still hurting Mandela today. She reflected, "And that has made

everything very difficult. And that was a huge mistake . . . it was wrong. And we're still suffering the consequences." Jin echoed these sentiments in our separate conversation.

Jin: And unfortunately I think that was—it hurt a lot, and we're still reeling from it ten years later that we weren't high school people. We had no concept of high school. And we picked people who might not have been the same state of mind or the same goals we had, the same background, the same work ethic, habits, whatever you want to call it. And high school is so daunting, overwhelming, and time consuming. Financially consuming. All those things that we didn't know anything about. And I think from then, not having a strong foothold or a strong plan for high school, we were kind of like flying by the seat of our pants, kind of working on things. And that hurt. And now we're solely high school. And I know some teachers are like man, I can't imagine teaching elementary school. Have three preps the whole week? I get three preps a day!

Karla: Right.

Jin: —that kinda thing. It's a different world. But it was, I still think what we planned for Mandela would have worked a lot better in a middle school situation, in a neighborhood situation.

Karla: Uh huh.

Jin: Because so much of what we wanted to be done was tied into the community—

Karla: Right. Can you talk about that? I was gonna ask you about that. Wasn't that part of your platform, right? Like you all know these kids in this community and that's what makes you the strongest—

Jin: Right. And that's why having that grassroots background and the services and the history of these kids—because they keep coming, they're coming in a cycle, we could

connect our kids to the community. Use our school as the hub and have people coming into the school instead of going out to get these services. We thought about . . . all these [community organizations] just—we can support our kids doing that, they can come in, have our kids provide service. And just make it into, it was kind of like what we had the vision like what Harlem did with—

Karla: —Yeah, the Harlem Children's Zone.

Jin: Yeah. Cuz that was, I don't think we had that grandiose of plans but we had the wantings of creating that, and the elementary schools would still send their kids so we could connect with them.

Karla: Right.

Jin: We really didn't think past high school. I think to our detriment we just thought we'll keep sending our kids to the best high schools we can.

Jin and Susan both talked about how even though their proposal was accepted and they were able to open Mandela High School, it did not mean that everything has been smooth sailing. They struggled to find a school leader who supported their vision, and it is still a constant struggle to recruit students. Even the students are aware of this precarious position. Several students commented to me in our interviews that they worried about what they would do if Mandela closed. Here is an excerpt from my interview with Devin and Jameese, where they talked about why they thought Mandela was different from other high schools.

Jameese: And then it's such a small school so it's like you know everybody.

Karla: So the size helps?

Jameese: Yeah.

Devin: Yeah the size help a lot. And we try to like, take in everything.

Jamese: Right

Devin: Anybody that come, they get accepted by a certain, a group. I mean, not by everybody.

Karla: Uh huh.

Devin: But they get accepted by some people.

Karla: And that's what you were saying about community?

Devin: Yeah we try to be (pause) united as a school.

Karla: Uh huh.

Devin: We, we know we only seeing each other, we only got each other because the school is so small.

Jamese: Right.

Karla: Uh huh.

Devin: Yes.

Karla: Aw, that sounds nice.

Jamese: (slight laugh)

Karla: Yeah, I don't, you say size. But it's size and this like community oriented. And so you're saying everybody's like that? The teachers AND the students?

Devin and Jamese: Yeah.

Karla: —both have that kind of feeling like, that we're all one and together

Devin: Yeah, especially like the people like, the teachers that, like your mom—

Karla: Mmm hmm.

Devin: Robinson, Joseph, all them teachers like, think we should be one.

Jamese: Yeah, and then, a lot of the teachers grew up together so when they tell that to the students the students like, oh yeah I came here with her I came here with him.

As I talked to them, I felt a strong sense that they felt that Mandela was a special place. Of course Devin and Jamese did not have firsthand experience at another high school to make any kind of direct comparison, but I still wanted to know in what ways they felt Mandela was different from other high schools. I asked them to comment on that.

Devin: It won't be the same if you transfer to another school.

Jamese: Right.

Karla: Uh huh.

Jamese: Like, that's what I was saying like, if Mandela was to close down—

Karla: Uh huh.

Jamese: Sooo, what am I supposed to do?

Karla: Right.

Jamese: Where I'm gonna go? Now I have to start over with a bunch of new people I don't even know.

Karla: Right.

Jamese: So it's just like, if something happens to Mandela then it might be—

Devin: It's something that you don't even wanna think about.

In this interview excerpt, Jamese and Devin talked about the uniqueness of Mandela because of the feeling of community they felt, but they also discussed a fear of what might happen if the school closed down. The fact that students and teachers alike were worried on a year-to-year basis whether or not the school would remain open highlighted additional pressure that the teachers were under. It also illustrates that the battle was not won when their proposal got

accepted. From my position as an outsider with insider information, it seemed to me that since its inception the Board of Education made it difficult for Mandela High School to thrive. Not being designated the neighborhood high school meant that Mandela had to recruit all their students—none were automatically assigned to Mandela High School. Mandela operated at less than full capacity from the time it opened, which meant they were in danger of being closed down if the Board decided they could save money by closing it. Mandela had also been in a budget crisis (this was an issue facing almost every Chicago school in recent years) because the amount of funding they received was tied to the number of students enrolled.

So far in this chapter, I have described how Mandela High School was formed out of a particular history of community activism in Lakewood. I have tried to make the argument that the older generation of activists in Lakewood (including Susan, John's mom, my mom, and many others) raised us to be critically conscious and with the desire to do work that could help fight systemic inequalities, which is what brought so many of us to teaching. Kurian was not from Lakewood, so he did not share this history. In the next section, I will talk about Kurian's own background and how even though he grew up very differently, he also developed this critical consciousness that led him to choose teaching as a way to carry out the work he felt was important to do.

Kurian's Political Development

Kurian's path to becoming critically conscious was different from those of us who grew up in the activist community in Lakewood. Kurian's parents were immigrants from Southern India. He was born in a suburb of Chicago then moved to Louisville as a child. Kurian went to predominantly white Catholic schools for elementary and high school. He told me his classes were largely focused on rote learning and memorization. He talked about how as a teenager, he

began to see this contradiction between what he was learning in church and what he was noticing out in the world. He explained how you learn these things in church and “then you go out and then you see homeless people in the street and that doesn’t make any sense!” He further described this time in his life:

So I’m getting disenchanted with Christianity. I’m starting to notice problems in the world. And I’m like why don’t people talk about this? And so by sophomore year I notice something’s wrong with the world, right? I’m around nothing political of any kind so just me kind of going “what the hell’s wrong with the world?” And then my junior year in my Spanish class they asked us to do a report on somebody from Latin America and I ended up doing it on Che Guevara. And this is around the time of Rage Against the Machine—they had that sticker. I had seen that sticker around, Rage Against the Machine. And I didn’t know who the guy was—I found out and was like okay, I’m gonna do a report on this guy. So I start to read about him and I’m like oh shit! This is what Jesus Christ would be doing if he was alive. He would be doing what Che Guevara was doing. So then I pretty much abandoned the Christianity thing. I mean, you know, that part, but I feel like if you act on it, you do stuff like THIS, right? Like Che Guevara. Basically, being a revolutionary. Jesus’s message was that’s what you need to do. Um, so probably junior year I actually considered myself a revolutionary. But with no idea what that meant right?

His described the evolution of his beliefs as stemming from noticing social problems and coming to believe that radical change is needed. He was frustrated by the church teaching about Jesus in a way that was disconnected from action and was then inspired by people like Che Guevara who provided a model for how one could act on these beliefs. He semi-jokingly told me at the time he believed “we need guerilla warfare in the Appalachian Mountains!” Unlike those of us who grew

up in Lakewood, he was developing these beliefs in isolation. Whereas our upbringing involved action and development of these political beliefs, his thinking changed but he still had to figure out a way to put his beliefs to action.

When Kurian went to college at Ivy League University he began to develop his thinking. He talked about going to Ivy in the summer before his freshman year for a transition program for students of color.

So when I go to Ivy for this transition program it's a little strange for me right? Because there's no white students here. Other Asian, South Asian students, black and Latino students, and other Asians. And it's a little uncomfortable for me, because I hadn't been in spaces like that before. So that was my first experience of being put in that category, people of color. And then once I started at Ivy and started taking classes that allowed me to explore some of the thoughts I'd been having about society. And that puts me in contact with other people. I didn't really, in high school I didn't, I knew there was racism, to a certain extent and I feel like I did identify with African Americans. But I had no real understanding of racism or anything like that. So leading to my name change or whatever [more on this below], in college I started to get a real understanding of what racism meant and the long history of racism in the United States.

He talked about joining a Socialist organization on campus but then leaving it after a year, for various reasons but also because "they did acknowledge racism but they didn't have a real analysis of it." He went on to describe how he took different classes, especially in the Africana studies department that were "real eye opening," particularly studying American history through the lens of African Americans.

During his college years Kurian talked about the development of his political views or his worldview. He said during this time he also hung out with other “political” Asian students. At this time Kurian was still going by his given name—Paul Joseph.

I don’t know when, it was probably my senior year, and I don’t know why I was thinking I need a new name for myself. Like something that more reflects me. I felt like Paul Joseph was such a white European name. I didn’t feel like it reflected me anymore? I remember asking my mom for other words in her language . . . Obviously like the corny political stuff, like what’s freedom in your language? What’s justice? . . . I don’t know how I decided on Kurian. It’s my middle name. It’s my dad’s name. . . I guess I felt like, you know cuz even the name Kurian isn’t an Indian name, it’s more a Christian name actually . . . But clearly it’s not an American name. So I think that was one reason why I went with it. It was more of my parents’ culture.

From what he told me, he started going by his middle name as a way to identify as a person of color and with his parents’ culture *and* as a way to reject white American culture. He told me “all the social justice people, all were going to do organizing work. So either union organizing or community organizing, that’s pretty much what everyone was going to do.” He planned on becoming a community organizer—he got a job in Oakland after he graduated and did an internship but shortly after starting work he decided he wasn’t cut out for that work. Kurian’s worldview hadn’t changed, but he needed to find a new way to do the kind of work he wanted to do.

During his college years is when he really developed his current views on the world. This development began in high school when he started questioning the seeming contradictions between the teachings of the Catholic Church and what he was noticing around him, but then

became more in depth when he took classes in college focused on examining these critical issues. It was during his time in college where Kurian decided he wanted to have a career where he could work towards the radical change he believed was necessary. Just to be clear, I asked him during an interview to tell me exactly what his political beliefs are, these beliefs that started developing in college that still ground his work today. This is what he told me:

I feel like the world is ruled and structured by systems of oppression, right? So that's racism—you know, the –isms. Racism, sexism, white supremacy, patriarchy, capitalism, ableism, you know, all those things. And I mean, I guess by definition oppression is unjust. Those things need to be eliminated, right? And I feel like a part of MY job is to be a part of that, in some form or fashion, movement to eliminate those systems of oppression . . . revolution, or WHATEVER, that's what it's gonna take. I think society needs to be radically restructured . . . pretty much everything has got to be changed if we want to live in a fair, just world where everyone has a chance to achieve their full potential.

Kurian took a different path in the development of his beliefs but he arrived at the same place as the founders of the school. This is the way they all view the world, and they chose teaching as a way to participate in a movement for social change. During my data collection I began to realize that there was a clear relationship between his beliefs and what I saw him teaching. I also learned that he was similar to those of us who grew up involved in activism in that his political beliefs came first, and his desire to teach stemmed from those beliefs. This is when I began to wonder, is there something different about what I am calling critically conscious teachers? I decided I should talk to Jin Li, the curriculum coordinator at Mandela, to get his perspective since he

interacts with all the teachers who have taught at Mandela over the years—some critically conscious, some not.

Conclusion: Critically Conscious Teachers

I asked Jin if he noticed any differences between teachers who begin teaching already having these critical views versus maybe teachers coming to teaching or starting a teaching program and beginning to learn about structural inequalities (or maybe not learning about them at all). He told me he definitely notices a difference. He said:

If you come in with a political—cuz teaching is a political act. I mean you just can't, you just can't—I mean, a bunch of people have said it—Freire said it, Zinn said it. You know, it's a political act. If you come in with an idea of what education should be and what the purpose of it—you come in with a purpose. So you have something. And it's a lot easier to—change, incorporate different ideas. You come in here like oh I'm just gonna teach, I'm just gonna educate and fill the kids' head with things—then you lack a sense of purpose, a direction. And it's really kind of hard to teach. Vanilla.

Jin and I talked more about teachers who teach just because they want to teach kids, rather than teachers who have a greater purpose, and he thought teachers who come to teaching just because they want to teach (as opposed to starting with a critical consciousness) end up struggling a lot of the time.

We are talking about teaching in a high-poverty setting. As Jin plainly stated, “our kids are losing.” They live in a world that is already stacked against them, and when teachers do not have an understanding of these macro-issues, they often struggle. Jin said if a teacher lacks a greater sense of purpose “in an urban district like Chicago? Where your clientele is what, 85-90% in the poverty range and have been feeling discriminated against, and feeling violence. You

gotta like, you gotta connect. And you can't tell them, oh the world will be fine, just go to school. Because it's not real to them." He also thought that teachers who believe "just go to school" is the answer they end up burning out faster, they have a more difficult time weathering some of the hardships of teaching.

Being what I am calling a critically conscious teacher affects the way you interact with students as well. It impacts a teacher's idea of who her students are and what her role is as their teacher. Freire (1970) described this as the "humanist, revolutionary educator" (p. 75). He talked about teachers engaging with students "in critical thinking and quest for mutual humanization" (p. 75). Engaging with students in a manner that humanizes both the students and the teacher is part of being critically conscious. Jin talked about how a lot of teachers who are not critically conscious come in with biased ideas, and also fear. He said,

If you walk into the classroom and you see all these Black faces in front of you and like, man, do they think I'm like, white and is gonna do something to them? Or am I afraid of these urban kids? Then, how can you connect? Because in your soul you're not trying to connect with them—you're just on a topical level, just trying to educate them. That's fine for a few years, but after that, it's draining.

Jin is clear that a teacher's political beliefs affect not only pedagogy but also interpersonal interactions with students and an ability to persevere in a difficult profession. The way that Kurian's political beliefs shape his curriculum, pedagogy, and the way he interacts with students is at the heart of my argument in this paper. In the next chapter I will discuss Kurian's curriculum—both the written curriculum and the way it is enacted in the classroom.

Chapter 5

Connecting with Students Through Curriculum

I came into this project thinking that personal interactions between the teacher and students would be the main thing I was looking for. I thought that would be the primary means by which Kurian built relationships with his students. Early on in my data collection I realized I needed to pay more attention to how Kurian connects with students through his curriculum. When I first started my observations, the class seemed like a traditional (but progressive) US History class. They were studying slavery in the United States, which is a hallmark of any US History course. One of the days when I was there “casing the joint” (Dyson & Genishi, 2005, p. 19) they did a lesson about Harriet Tubman, and Kurian told the class that he was making a case that she was “a gangsta for Black Freedom.” So his class started out the way I more or less expected—he was approaching US History from a social justice perspective. But then he moved from Reconstruction to the Black Codes to mass incarceration and the War on Drugs and I realized his class was something very different from the average US History class. As Elijah said in our interview, “He taught us slavery all the way to gangs . . . I already knew about slavery but he taught us some stuff that I never knew and, we went from that to, you know, like the civil war times . . . til now, modern day.” Kurian designed his curriculum in a way that centers things relevant to the students’ lives, which stems from his beliefs about his role in the classroom. He said:

So I guess a good social justice teacher can help students, you know, develop a critical understanding of the reality that they live in. Yeah so, and for me that comes through content. The stuff we talk about, how relevant is it to their lives? And not just relevance for the sake of hooking kids into a lesson to get them to learn . . . but the relevance of

actually changing unjust or oppressive situations . . . Yeah, so my—the bar I’m always trying to reach and I’m still reaching for it is students getting to a point where they’re actively involved in trying to change stuff in the world or being prepared to do that or having the mindset so when they’re out of school they do it, or after graduation.

Ladson-Billings (2014) talked about many well-meaning teachers embracing aspects of culturally relevant pedagogy but missing key components. She said, “They rarely pushed students to consider critical perspectives on policies and practices that may have direct impact on their lives and communities. There was no discussion of issues such as school choice, school closings, rising incarceration rates, gun laws, or even everyday school climate questions like whether students should wear uniforms” (p. 78). This critical perspective is the focus of Kurian’s classroom on a day-to-day basis. Rolón-Dow (2005) made a case for “critical care” and argued that many teachers are “not taking into account . . . the political issues that matter in the lives of students of color” (p. 87).

In this chapter I will take an in-depth look at the different ways in which Kurian demonstrates Rolón-Dow’s version of critical care. This version of critical care is embodied in the relationships central to this project. I argue that because Kurian’s curriculum centers on critical issues that directly impact his students, he is caring for his students in a way that is meaningful beyond a surface, interpersonal relationship. Valenzuela (1999) asked, “What does it mean to care about children from marginalized communities, given the political and social context in which education takes place?” (p. xvi). In this chapter I argue that Kurian demonstrates that he cares for his students through the enactment of a critical curriculum that centers on the social and political realities of his students’ lives.

I will begin by talking about Kurian’s written curriculum—an overview of the units he

taught, discussion of how he developed his curriculum, and why he thought it was important. Then I will talk about the routines Kurian established in his classroom that regularly fueled interactions between him and his students, and also how he demonstrated his willingness to be flexible in his plans when the need arises (e.g., things happen in the world that are relevant and important to discuss). Finally I will show the ways Kurian’s curriculum is enacted on a daily basis in a way that is critical, relevant, participatory, and hopefully, inspires change.

The Written Curriculum

Overview of Unit Plans (see table 5.1). The following statement came from Kurian’s unit plans, and attributed to *Rethinking Schools*:

The Social Studies Department of Mandela High School is committed to curriculum that is 1) grounded in the lives of our students; 2) critical; 3) multicultural, anti-racist, pro-justice; 4) participatory, experiential; 5) hopeful, joyful, kind, visionary; 6) activist; 7) academically rigorous; and 8) culturally and linguistically sensitive.

Table 5.1. Overview of unit topics/essential questions

Unit topic	Essential Questions
Christopher Columbus and Native American Genocide	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Why is Christopher Columbus honored with a holiday in the US? 2. How do we know what we know about the past? 3. Why do most textbooks leave out important details about Columbus? 4. What happened to the Native Americans who lived on the land the US now occupies? 5. What is manifest destiny?
Slavery	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. How does understanding slavery help us understand the US today? 2. How did slavery affect the US economically, politically and socially? 3. Who were enslaved Africans and how did they respond to their enslavement? 4. How did enslaved Africans and others resist the oppression of slavery?
Black Codes and mass incarceration	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What is the origin of our modern racialized prison system? 2. Why was slavery not completely over after Emancipation? 3. How were the black codes used to oppress freedpeople?

Table 5.1. Overview of unit topics/essential questions (continued)

Unit topic	Essential Questions
The Gilded Age and economic inequality	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Why doesn't everyone have enough money to live a good life? 2. Why does capitalism require there be different classes? 3. What is class oppression and how does it work? 4. How did capitalists of the Gilded Age oppress and exploit working class people? Does it still happen today? 5. How did Gilded Age working class people resist their oppression and exploitation? How do working class people resist today? 6. What type of lifestyle can you have on minimum wage? What would a fair wage be for a family of four? How do we make that happen?
Root causes of violence in Chicago/role of the government	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. How does neighborhood violence affect me, my family, and my community? 2. Where do most homicides happen in Chicago, and what do those areas have in common? 3. What is the purpose of government? 4. If we don't like something happening in our neighborhoods, what options do we have to do something about it? 5. How can we use our government to better our lives and the lives of people in our communities?
Immigration	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. How were immigrants scapegoated in mainstream American society during the late 19th and early 20th centuries? 2. How did the experiences of Southeastern European immigrants compare to Asian immigrants in the US during this time? 3. How did racism affect popular and government responses to the "new immigrants" of the late 1800s?
Imperialism/US Military	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. When is war justified? 2. Is there a contradiction or hypocrisy in the US being an empire? 3. How was US involvement in the Spanish American War an example of imperialism? 4. What motivates people to join the military? 5. What information should you know before joining the military?

The essential questions demonstrate the critical perspective Kurian aims for. The overview clearly demonstrates that Kurian does not aim to teach US History from a traditional perspective. Throughout the year he is designing opportunities for students to investigate how modern society is rooted in history as well as the entrenched nature of racism and oppression. During the time I was there doing official data collection, they were working on the units on mass incarceration, income inequality, and violence in Chicago. Of the units he teaches, those are especially centered on modern times, with a focus on issues students deal with on a regular

basis. Before Kurian began his unit on mass incarceration he gave his students a survey asking if they had someone in their family as well as someone they are close to but not related to who had been in the prison system. Ninety to ninety-five percent of the students said yes to both questions, a clear indication that these issues are grounded in the lives of the students.

The importance of the curriculum. The teachers at Mandela are responsible for creating their own curriculum. They are not given any frameworks or units to modify. They are guided by the same mandates as other teachers—pressures to raise standardized test scores as well as the almost universal adoption of the Common Core standards. Kurian is in a unique position because he teaches an untested subject. But this does not mean he feels free from all pressure.

I'm in this classroom to teach a specific thing, right? And it's not, I mean, particularly the social justice stuff. Everything I teach matters. I believe kids HAVE to know this stuff. So I don't have time for chitchat, side conversations. I always feel like we HAVE to get through this stuff, we HAVE to know this, and so I'm gonna be about business the whole class, right?

Kurian made these comments to me specifically in the context of talking about how he relies heavily on his curriculum as a way of connecting with students, in contrast to other teachers who have reputations for interacting with students on a personal level more regularly. Kurian strongly believes in the importance of his curriculum and feels confident that because his curriculum is so directly related to his students' lives that he is able to connect with them primarily through the content of the class. At least to some extent, he is right. I asked Luis and Kendrick (focal students) what is it about teachers they like, why do they like the teachers they like?

Kendrick: See, the thing about me is, I'm not gonna lie—

Karla: I don't want you to lie! I want you to be honest!

Kendrick: I'm kinda—I'm not gonna say racist but—

Karla: Uh huh.

Kendrick: I'm very comfortable with people from where I come from—people of my nation.

Karla: You like Black teachers better, in general?

Kendrick: Not Black teachers.

Karla: Okay.

Kendrick: —Because Robinson is not Black. Joseph is not Black. But they have that (pause) personality and that style OF (pause)

Karla: Oh, okay so you're not saying race then?

Kendrick: It's not race.

Karla: What is it?

Kendrick: I don't know, it's like—

Luis: It's the way that they—it's the way they understand him. It's like, they know where he's coming from, but they're not from where he's from.

Karla: Okay.

Kendrick: Right. Like a cool—like I-grew-up-like-you type.

Kendrick felt like Mr. Joseph was able to understand him and where he's coming from; he even talked about communicating an “I grew up like you” type of understanding. What's interesting is that Kurian did not grow up “like” Kendrick. I asked Kurian how he feels like he is able to achieve this with his students.

Kurian: I mean so for me, since I didn't grow up in Chicago, I mean, especially compared to my students [I] grew up pretty privileged um, I think that was—uh you know, re-educating myself or (pause) yeah. Like changing, swapping out what I had in my head or what I had been taught growing up about people living in the city, about Black people, poor people, working class people, whatever. And yeah, I mean it was through my own politicization, and that whole coming to consciousness thing and understanding oppression and why things are the way they are. Um, I mean you know, cuz my understanding of it as that—all the negative stuff or whatever that gets associated with the city schools or the gangs or you know, all that stuff. I think people who are you know, conservatives or liberals in the end, they at some level blame individuals for it, like you know, it's your fault, if you tried harder or had a better work ethic or if your parents cared about you you wouldn't have these problems. But, I mean, my, the understanding I've come to—through my education and also just living in Chicago and working in schools is that I mean, there are bigger systems involved right? So I can't—I don't blame any individual for what they do, and I mean, I feel like if I grew up in a similar situation I'd probably do the same thing, right? Like, I can't judge kids. And I know some of them are involved in the street, so I don't look down on them, uh, for that. Cuz I understand you know, people make whatever choices they make in certain contexts. And you can't judge them if your context is different—you have no basis to pass any judgment.

Karla: Right.

Kurian: So I mean, I come from a place of, I think of empathy, right? So whatever struggles or challenges kids are going through um, yeah I'm not coming from a place of judgment or I'm here to help you or save you, I have the answer if only you listened to

me or act like me or whatever, then you'll be in the middle class and live the American dream kinda thing.

When I pressed him on how he thinks he communicates this understanding, this empathy to his students he said he does it through the content of the class. He designed a curriculum that is relevant to their lives and designs lessons so that students are able to participate and contribute. The ways Kurian creates space for student voices will be discussed in the next section; first I want to talk about the ways he created his curriculum.

Curriculum design. Kurian talked to me about how he got oriented to social justice teaching when he first started teaching, which is also when Mandela first opened. He told me Jeff Duncan-Andrade came to Chicago and did a workshop with teachers from Mandela and other high schools on social justice teaching. Kurian explained that the model Duncan-Andrade laid out for them was “always a motivator” for him both in terms of creating his curriculum and refining/revising it. He said the model sets a high bar for social justice teaching, “and so it never felt like I had, you know, achieved anything or made it or like had finished that process of trying to come up with a social justice curriculum.” He feels like Duncan-Andrade’s model was something he kept striving for, but still fell short.

Out of their collaboration with Duncan-Andrade evolved an inquiry group. Kurian explained to me that this model, created by Duncan-Andrade, was “a way to transform schools. So it involved veteran teachers working with newer teachers to tip the balance in the school to get people on the same page” in terms of social justice teaching. He explained to me that although the inquiry group had changed over the last ten years, it still involved doing some kind of reading/political education and then also an aspect of workshopping with unit/lesson planning—all with the goal of becoming better social justice educators. Participation in the group

was voluntary and the members taught all different content areas. Kurian felt like the inquiry group had been tremendously beneficial to him. He explained, “It’s been helpful to just get feedback and read and discuss with other people and develop my thinking and then get people’s concrete feedback on stuff I’m teaching.”

Kurian said his goal was to create a social studies curriculum that was liberatory, which was not an easy thing to create. He said the inquiry group helped re-focus him when it was easy to get caught up in the day-to-day aspects of teaching. I asked him to give me a concrete example of a way he thought participating in the inquiry group had helped his teaching. He told me every year they start off the year by reading the first two chapters of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. He said, “Every year I read it in a different way and can apply it differently. . . . I remember one of the points being re-presenting to students their own reality then, you know, the problem-posing education.” He told me that his unit on class and capitalism had progressed a lot from participating in the inquiry group. “I’m happy with where it’s come in the time I’ve been teaching because of all the feedback from the inquiry group.”

Kurian set a high bar for himself in terms of his hopes for his class and curriculum. His beliefs about what his curriculum was and should do also informed the way he treated and interacted with his students—and this was not a minor point. Because Kurian believed his students had agency and expertise, he treated them as such. I asked him what kind of connection he saw between his curriculum and his relationships with students. He told me:

I feel like it’s one of the reasons I get along with students? I get the general sense that most kids like me, like my class because it’s relevant social studies. Cuz I often think about teachers who like just teach out of the textbook and I don’t know, like how do the kids sit and listen to you do this? I don’t know, I’m like genuinely curious like how does

that work for you? Cuz I couldn't imagine trying to do that. It just—it's dead. I mean, I don't wanna do that stuff. Um, so I think the relevance of the content. I mean I think they get some sense of oh, he's thinking about us or my life or what I go through because we're spending time in class learning about it? Um, so yeah I think they get some sense that in whatever way I'm on their side—to a certain extent, through the content. And that does a lot, right? Because often teachers are authority figures or oppositional behavior is directed AT the teacher.

Kurian's view is that his curriculum does a lot of the work in terms of building relationships with his students. The curriculum, however, is not just his written unit plans but also the way his plans are enacted every day *with his students*. That is what I will be discussing next.

Fixed and Flexible: Creating Space for Student Voice

Kurian's classroom was one where students felt like their voice was valued. He did this by creating structures by which students regularly shared their thoughts on whatever they were discussing in class, and also by talking about things he and they considered relevant, even if they were not directly related to the topic for the day. First I am going to discuss Kurian's most consistent structures for class participation: the daily bell ringer and the reflection question.

Bell ringers and reflection questions. The beginning of every class consisted of a routine of students filtering in to the classroom, chitchat between students and between Kurian and various students, Kurian reminding students to get their IDs out (a school rule), and students answering a bell ringer question on paper (see table 5.2). The bell ringer was the opening to the lesson every day—it was usually a question related to whatever they were going to talk about that day, sometimes connecting what they had previously learned to today's topic.

Table 5.2. Sample of bell ringer questions and daily objectives

Bell Ringer question	Objective for the day
Do you think CPD arrests all races equally for marijuana possession? (Reminder: All races use marijuana at about the same rate.)	Describe Chicago arrests for marijuana possession.
Would you say that there are more Americans who are rich or more Americans who are poor? Explain.	Describe class differences.
1) Is being rich one of your goals in life? 2) What's the minimum amount of money you think someone needs to have to be classified as rich?	Describe income inequality in the US.
What makes a job a good job?	Explain the conflict between capitalists and workers.
How do you win Monopoly? Who is the Monopoly guy supposed to be?	Describe inequality in the Gilded Age.
What do you think a living wage is?	Define a living wage.

After students had a chance to write down an answer to the bell ringer question, Kurian would bring the whole class back together (he would go from moving around the room checking on students' bell ringer completion to standing in the front of the room) and ask who wanted to share what they wrote for their bell ringers. He would then call on volunteers. Here is the discussion that happened in 2nd period about the bell ringer question on marijuana arrests in Chicago, taken from my field notes:

Kurian begins the conversation, and reminds them again they already learned every racial group uses marijuana at about the same rate. So now they're going to talk about here, in Chicago. How do they think it looks in terms of who gets arrested?

Jeremy raises his hand and says he thinks it's even.

Kurian says okay, so despite what we've learned about the war on drugs he still thinks here in Chicago it might be even (his tone doesn't sound like he's challenging Jeremy's answer though. He sounds like he believes it could be a legitimate answer.)

Samantha says she thinks more Blacks and Hispanics get arrested in Chicago.

LaChyrell tells a story about being at the park last summer and the police planted a bag on people who were sitting on a bench. She said, so she thinks the police frame people.

Kurian says, so LaChyrell is taking it one step further. Not only will the police go after black people more, but they'll actually plant stuff.

Tinesha said people get racially profiled.

This interaction was typical of many of the conversations about bell ringer questions I was present for. Students would volunteer to answer the question and Kurian would legitimate, reiterate, or sometimes add on to what the students said. Students gave their opinions and also shared relevant personal experience. Kurian's responses to student contributions were always in a way that showed he felt their answers were legitimate, even if they were off base, like Jeremy was in assuming despite everything they'd learned about the War on Drugs things still could have been equal in Chicago for drug arrests. Kurian usually took all bell ringer answers without evaluating them, and then moved in to the lesson which would be related to the bell ringer question. For example, on the day they talked about drug arrests in Chicago, the main part of the lesson was reading an article that included statistics on the disproportionate percent of Black people in Chicago who make up arrests and convictions for marijuana possession.

Students had strong opinions about a lot of the things they talked about in class.

Sometimes these strong opinions emerged right at the beginning, and sometimes it wasn't until after they had learned a little bit more about the topic that students got into the discussions. One day the bell ringer asked whether a teacher assume a student is lazy if they sleep in class and rarely do any work. Atypically, students began discussing their thoughts before Kurian brought them back together, while he was still in the walking around and monitoring phase. He even tells

them at one point to wait, let everyone get a chance to write something down, then they'll talk about it. Here is the conversation that followed in 2nd period, from my field notes:

Kurian says, "It sounds like a lot of you have something to say, just be patient and I'll get to you, I promise" and he reads the bell ringer out loud again.

Aubrey says no, maybe they have to do stuff at home, or maybe they have a job.

Samantha says maybe they're having family problems.

Jeremy says maybe they had a rough night.

Zenobia says you (meaning teachers in general) can assume what you want as long as you don't punish them without asking questions.

Kurian reiterates her answer, and says so she is saying the problem is not in the assumptions, it's the actions that come from the assumptions.

Isaac says maybe they have a physical condition, like a sleeping disorder.

A couple of girls ask, is that a thing? Kurian says yeah, narcolepsy, or someone could even just be sick.

A girl asks so, you could be standing up and fall asleep?

Kurian says yeah.

Jeremy says, "I want that!"

Jeremy turns around to get something off Samantha's desk. Kurian tells him to turn around, that's why he moved his seat in the first place.

Brianna says it's not fair to assume.

Tinesha says the student could be having a bad day, or it could be a lack of motivation, you never know.

LaChyrell adds, or a learning disorder.

Kurian asks if anyone else has anything to add; then, when no one else volunteers, he says he agrees with them. You can't assume anything about a student without knowing their story.

It is easy to understand why students were more into this bell ringer compared to other days. The question is clearly related to experiences they had. Students also told me that they value teachers who understand that they might have stuff going on outside of school that affects them in school. Samantha (focal student) said, "A good relationship is when you're able to let your teacher know what's going on and stuff." She explained later that other teachers "don't think about reality. They just think about you're in school so you gotta do what you came for." This bell ringer seemed to strike a nerve with students. Kurian giving them this bell ringer—along with the overall purpose for the class, which was to explain the different factors that contribute to people's actions—communicated to the students that he is one of those understanding teachers. Although this was not his main goal, this point is not lost on the students.

Bell ringers functioned as a way to introduce students to the content of the day, a way to let students share their ideas on the topic, and a way for Kurian to see where students were with the day's topic. They also functioned as a transition from the unstructured passing period to the official beginning of class. The following is from my field notes from the beginning of a 3rd period class—the day's bell ringer was, "Can a business run without a CEO? Can a business run without workers?"

Kurian asks the class who thinks a company could run without a CEO? Only Jabari and Raynard raise their hands to say yes. Kurian says, "only 2 people." He says, "Okay Jabari, you look a little crazy cuz everybody else is saying no, why do you say yes?"

Jabari answers but I can't hear him (the class is still a little bit chatty).

Kurian tells the class to quiet down. He starts to say Jabari answered the question but—interrupts himself to tell LeShaun to quiet down. LeShaun says “my bad” and does quiet down.

Kurian says nobody heard Jabari's answer because there was so much talking.

Jabari repeats his answer. He says the CEOs don't do the work that keeps the company going, that's why companies don't need CEOs.

Kurian asks, who says they do need them?

Kendrell says CEOs make decisions and give people jobs.

Elijah says without the CEOs there would be no product to be sold, nothing to work for.

There is still quite a bit of talking, a lot of people are not really paying attention.

Kurian asks, how about number two? Could a business run without workers?

Davonte said without workers there would be no product being made or sold.

Kurian (raising voice a little): “All right guys, again, we're like five minutes into class, Hassan, and you guys are talking too much.” He tells the class they are still talking too much for class to have started five minutes ago. “So Davonte was saying, you need to have workers or else no product is being made, right?”

Kurian asks, does anybody say yes to number two? (Nobody raises their hand or speaks up.)

He said it makes sense that nobody would say yes because workers are the ones that do the daily work.

Kurian passes out the sheet for the day's lesson. He says we're going to test this and see, what happens if you get rid of the CEO, how would it work?

This example is representative of what reviewing the bell ringer looked like on many days—especially in 3rd period, which was the more talkative class of the two I sat in on. Students were still given space to share their voice, but it was not nice and neat all the time. There was a lot going on, especially at the beginning of the class when students were still settling down. Kurian still maintained this structure of having students weigh in on the topic for the day before they got all the way into the lesson. Sometimes increased noise levels meant fewer people were able to share their thoughts but Kurian still always tried to get multiple ideas from students.

At the end of most classes, students answered a reflection question (on paper) and then volunteers shared their answers. Reflection questions were not as commonplace as bell ringer questions because sometimes the class ran out of time. But the expectation was still that if they had time, students would have time to share their thoughts. One day they were talking about gangs—they had watched part of a documentary about the Crips and Bloods in LA. The reflection question asked the students to “use their imagination” and think about what would society have to do for gangs to go away. Kurian told them he wants them to “think big,” even if they think it can’t happen. The following is from my field notes from 2nd period:

The students write for a minute or two in silence. When most students are done Kurian asks volunteers to share one thing they wrote. Students call out different ideas. I wasn’t able to note who made which contributions because they were talking over each other a little bit. Students said: people should be able to live where they want (related to segregated neighborhoods/concentration of poverty), there should be community centers opened, give people jobs, keep public housing nice, encourage people to stay in school. Tinesha said they should put an end to food deserts. LaChyrell said jobs should pay enough so that one parent could make enough money so the other parent would be able to

stay at home with the kids. Kurian says yeah, and asks them do they see the connection between the gangs and the living wage and the pyramid (which shows the way income is distributed in the United States). I looked over their written reflection questions after class and overwhelmingly the students wrote down jobs would be the solution. Other common answers were community centers and other activities for young people to be involved in.

Reflection questions were a good way for Kurian to check for understanding. The student contributions and written answers showed that students were developing an understanding of the way poverty and unemployment lead to participation in gangs. The habit of sharing out thoughts on the reflection questions was also another way students were given voice in Kurian's classroom—their ideas mattered. One day when I was there the lesson consisted of looking at different aspects of the end of Reconstruction—they looked at a drawing and read an excerpt from a Frederick Douglass speech. The reflection question asked if they thought the US would be different today if Black people would have gotten their forty acres. After students had a chance to write he asked for a show of hands, who thought the country would be different. Of the students who raised their hand a couple volunteered to explain. Tinesha said she thought it would have made Black people more equal, a couple other kids offered additional explanations for why they thought it would make a difference. Then Kurian asked them to pass up their papers if they were done. Someone reminded him he didn't ask about people who thought it would not have made a difference!

Kurian said, "Oh yeah, my bad!" and asked who wanted to say why they thought it would make no difference. Someone said they thought white people would have ended up taking the land back later. Sanaa said white people would have still been so angry they would have thought

of other ways to oppress Black people. Jeremiah made a comment about how white people should have been over it, and asked how many years has it been since slavery ended? The student called Kurian out for forgetting to ask for other opinions! He created a space where students felt like their voices were going to get heard, and they wanted to be heard.

Bell ringers and reflection questions were the consistent structures that took place almost every class period where the expectation was that students would share their ideas and opinions. These were not the only times, however. Kurian's overall classroom was structured in a way that valued students' lived experiences and drew from them as often as possible. This happened both in the ways he planned his lessons out and when things came up that weren't part of the original plan—both teacher initiated and student initiated. I will talk about those flexible instances next, and then discuss how Kurian's curriculum was enacted in a way that demonstrated “critical care.”

Flexibility. The outside world was an explicit part of Kurian's classroom. That was made evident to me on November 25, the day after the announcement of the non-indictment of Darren Wilson, the police officer who killed Mike Brown in Ferguson, Missouri. This is from my field notes from 2nd period:

The classroom is buzzing with conversation. Students are talking to each other, or commenting to no one in particular their outrage and disbelief, “that’s bogus” and “how many more times?” Mimi tells Kurian she saw on the BET Hip Hop awards that they did a tribute to Mike Brown, and his parents were on the stage. Kurian responds that he remembered seeing that, as he sits at his computer looking for pictures of the demonstrations that happened in Chicago last night to show the students. Mimi says, “I feel like no matter how much we protest, things don’t change.” Students murmur

responses. Kurian asks the class, how many people agree? We see things like this happen over and over again and a lot of people end up feeling that way. Isaiah exclaims: “I don’t agree!” Kurian goes on to say, “How many more Trayvon Martins? How many more Jordan Davises? How many more Mike Browns until things change?” Then, in response to Isaiah he asks him, so what gives you hope? Isaiah explains that the protests show that people aren’t going to just sit around and take it. Kurian responds, so the question is, what do WE have to do and what are WE going to do together to change things? The students, still fired up, call out things like: “Kill all the police officers” and “If this happens again, I swear.” Kurian responds that anger is a valid response, but it won’t get us very far because the police will always be more powerful. So how do we actually make real changes? And talks about how there have been increased voter registration efforts in Ferguson so they can elect new people and have more community representation in local government. He adds on that here in Chicago there are organizations working against police brutality that he can connect them to if they are interested. He explains that the group just went to the United Nations, so there is stuff happening in Chicago that they can get involved with.

Kurian scrapped whatever plans he had for the day and devoted the classes to discussing what happened and what can happen next. Kurian created a space for students to express their unfiltered responses and discuss any confusion about the grand jury procedure. His consistent charge to them was what can we do? How can we work to change things? As an observer, sitting in on classes on this day was very powerful. Students were outraged—and that outrage was welcomed. They watched video footage of people protesting in Ferguson and a protestor said,

“At the end of the day black lives don’t matter.” Mimi called out, “They sure don’t! I agree with that!” Here is more of the conversation from that day:

A couple of girls start asking about Obama, asking what is he doing. Kurian said Obama came on TV last night. James said, “He always saying something, not doing nothing!” Kurian tells them Obama said we need to fix the mistrust between the police and communities of color, but that we need to respect the decision of the grand jury and not do anything violent.

James said, “Hell naw!”

Mimi says she wonders do any Chicago police officers feel like what Darren Wilson did was right?

Kurian tells her to ask Officer Johnson (the Chicago police officer who is assigned to Mandela). Kurian said when they go down to lunch they should ask him. Mimi says, well Officer Johnson is Black. She means a white police officer.

Kurian says you’d be surprised. His wife has a friend who’s a cop (and black) and he was arguing for Darren Wilson, saying he had a right to kill Mike Brown. So just because people are Black or white doesn’t mean you can guess how they think.

Another girl says she’s going to ask Officer Johnson.

LaChyrell says nothing has changed just because we have a Black president.

Mimi says we need to be heard!

Kurian says, “all right! Let’s make a plan!”

Mimi says, “Where Rahm Emanuel at?”

LaChyrell says Obama’s words go in one ear and out the other. Nobody changes anything just because he said something.

Kurian tries to talk over the kids (who are still talking about this, no off-topic conversations). He says two points about Obama, one is he's been President for a while now. He says he voted for him in '08 expecting some change. James says, "You thought he was gonna do something." Kurian goes on to say, "I was naïve to think that was going to happen. I don't know his own personal beliefs about this. Either he feels one way privately but because of his position he has to watch what he says OR he says exactly what he believes." The second thing, he says, is that as president, we think of him as all-powerful. But in terms of the Ferguson police department he can't do anything himself. He can ask the attorney general to get involved, but he doesn't have any direct power. He can't fire the police chief or anything like that, he can't do that. And then the second question: Is it really in his heart to do anything about it? That's something we need to figure out.

Mimi says, "We need to take a trip!"

Kurian says, "One thing we can learn in this class is don't expect any politician to save you. Don't expect Obama to save you."

A girl says, "They not gonna listen to us!"

Kurian says, that's not how things change. "Things change when, what Mimi's talking about—when YOU want to change them."

Mimi says, "Right!"

Several kids are getting amped up. "That's what I'm saying!" Some students are clapping. Mimi says something about tearing this mug up.

This day in class was very much an eye-opener for me. This was the first day I heard Kurian make such strong statements about his own personal beliefs as well as the statements he

made about the purpose of the class overall (“what are WE gonna do to change things?”). The students were also very interested in the discussion. When Kurian passed out the paper that had an explanation of the grand jury proceedings Jameese shushed her classmates and told them she wanted to read. Mimi left the class saying she was going to bring this up in her other classes. Kurian did not shy away from discussing what was going on in the world, nor did he try to control the direction of the discussion. He allowed students to talk about things the way they wanted, and responded organically to them rather than pushing an agenda—aside from his push towards action.

Kurian created space for his students to express opinions, ask questions, and talk together. These things were built in to his lessons on a daily basis, but there were times when the regularly scheduled plans were adjusted. Here is another similar instance from my field notes, from the first day back after Thanksgiving Break in 3rd period. Kurian took some time at the beginning of class to discuss news from over the break, including new facts that emerged about Darren Wilson’s version of the story:

Kurian explained that what he heard on the news is according to Darren Wilson there was some kind of conflict in the car; Mike Brown was hitting and punching him.

Jamar asked, incredulously, “Why would somebody fight a cop?” and muttered that that makes no sense.

Another student then asked, so then how did he get shot?

Kurian mentioned that there is conflicting testimony about what happened.

Davonte said, wasn’t he with his friend? He thought his friend said what happened too.

Kurian said he doesn’t know what went wrong with the grand jury. The stories don’t match up, “that’s the troubling part.” Then he added, “and Michael Brown doesn’t get to

defend himself.” Kurian then asked the class if they heard about the twelve-year-old boy who got killed. A few students said yeah. Kurian said, “Supposedly they thought he was in his twenties.” Marcus said, “Don’t no twelve-year-old look like a twenty-year old!”

Kurian added that he got shot within three seconds of the police pulling up, and said that’s not even enough time for him to hear the cops and put the gun down.

Marcus is in disbelief. “Like, do they ever say freeze anymore? They just shoot?”

Kurian said it’s another crazy story. And hopefully it’ll build some momentum and people will want to do something about it.

A of couple students make comments about how crazy it is for the police to just shoot.

Kurian agreed, and said yeah, and they don’t do that for other people. Somebody jumps over the White House fence and he just gets arrested, not shot. Clearly, race is a factor with the twelve-year-old too. If the boy would have been white, it probably wouldn’t have gone down like that.

There are several aspects of this exchange that are interesting. The students were clearly expressing that they found it extremely difficult to believe the police’s versions of both stories. Students understand how exchanges with the police often go, which is why Jamar was very skeptical about Darren Wilson’s version of the story. Kurian not only affirmed these opinions but he also added additional information to support what they were saying. Based on the comments from the students, Kurian was correct in assuming that this was something important enough to discuss, even if it wasn’t part of the plan for the day. He also let the students determine the direction of the conversation. During 2nd period, the conversation took a different route because students brought up a connection to the Jordan Davis case and had questions for Kurian about that. So even though Kurian asked both classes about what updates they had heard about Darren

Wilson and Tamir Rice over the weekend, the students in the classes largely determined the direction of the conversations.

Kurian wanted to talk about these issues openly in class and also expressed the hope that people will take action to try and change things. Kurian consistently had conversations with his students about the role of racism in society—much of his curriculum was structured around the notion that racism is endemic in American society. In the next section, I am going to discuss the enactment of his written curriculum.

The Enacted Curriculum: Grounded, Critical and Participatory

I have talked about the routine ways Kurian sought student opinions—through bell ringers and reflection questions— and about how he was responsive to things the students wanted to talk about and used class time to talk about things that happened in the world. However, it is not like those were the only times in class where students talked, and in between, he lectured. In this section I am going focus on the enactment of his planned lessons. I am going to explain how Kurian and his students co-constructed knowledge or contributed to the discussion to come to common understandings about the topic of the day—during his regular instruction time. This is not to say Kurian never gave notes or told them things because there were things that he knew that the students didn't (and vice versa). Kurian's curriculum was purposely designed so it built on students' experiences. I am going to do my best to describe the everyday happenings in his classroom to get a sense of the culture that they established where opinions were shared and validated. The exchanges Kurian had with his students on a consistent basis demonstrated what he told me: for much of what they talk about in class, "the students are the experts in the room."

In mid-November, they were finishing up a unit on slavery and Reconstruction and transitioning to a unit on mass incarceration. Kurian used the Black Codes and the Thirteenth Amendment to link the two topics, which seem separate at least on a timeline. On this day in 3rd period Kurian shared examples of Black Codes with students, and then asked for volunteers to act out short skits demonstrating how the Black Codes worked in practice. The skits were already scripted. One of the skits showed the enforcement of a law that Black people could be fined for being in possession of a knife or anything that could be used as a weapon without a permit. The following exchange, taken from my field notes, happened after students acted out that skit:

Kurian asks the class, what's the rule that they broke?

Several students say no weapons.

Kurian asks, "What does the law say?"

A student responds, they need a permit.

Kurian agrees, "Yeah, they need a permit. This law applies only to Black people. White people don't need permits for their guns."

The law is still on the board. Kurian boxes out the word knife with a marker and asks, "What is that? Black people aren't allowed to have knives! Who doesn't have a knife?"

He continues on, yeah, it's crazy, right? And then asks the students to answer the question on their paper describing the injustice in this law.

A student says, it's crazy that they could go to jail for something they need! Kurian says, yeah exactly, or something that's legal for white people to have.

He reminds them most Black people don't have the money to pay these fines, so they end up sitting in jail.

There is one last law, which ties everything together. Two of the same characters are coming back. He asks Elijah to read the law out loud and asks the class to be quiet so Elijah can read. He says, “The skit will make it real clear.” (The law is written in old-fashioned legal language; it is not the easiest to understand.)

Kurian plays one of the characters, two of the characters from the last skits come back, and a new student is going to play the judge.

He tells them this is the scene where the two characters from the previous skits are in court.

Kurian plays a former slave owner who speaks up in court and offers to let the two men work for him, since they are unable to pay off their small fines. Kurian’s character announces to the court that he’ll be able to pay off their fines over the next two years.

Several students: “Dammnnnn” (like that’s bogus, that’s a long time).

After the scene Kurian asks the class, what did the court allow his character to do?

Students answer that they let them work for the white man. Kurian explains, so the white person can stretch it out, have Black people work for pretty much however long they want. He said if a white person didn’t have any workers, he could just hang out in the courtroom and offer to pay Black people’s fines and get workers for extended periods of time.

“So crazy stuff. They had these bogus laws that pertained only to Black people” and they were essentially a trap to get Black people back into slavery.

He tells them to answer again on their papers, why is this an injustice?

Kurian talked more than the students in this exchange—he is building background knowledge.

He wanted them to see the connections between slavery and mass incarceration in current times.

Instead of just giving them the laws as written and trying to explain what they meant, Kurian designs the lesson so the students can come to an understanding on their own, through what happened in the skits. He de-centered himself as the source of knowledge even on a topic the students did not have a lot of background knowledge on.

A later lesson in that same unit focused on how Black people in Chicago are disproportionately arrested and convicted for marijuana possession. In the beginning of the lesson he wanted students to think about drug laws and why they exist in the first place. He put statements up on the board and had students move to different parts of the room depending on their level of agreement with the statement (strongly agree, agree, disagree, strongly disagree). The following discussion from 3rd period is taken from my field notes:

The first statement Kurian puts up on the board is “People should not go to jail for smoking weed.” All the students move to strongly agree and agree. There is a lot of talking going on as they move and once they get to their sections of the room. Kurian reminds them a couple times that they should be talking together about their rationale so someone from their group can share out.

A boy says to another student, “Now you know you don’t smoke.”

Kurian goes to talk with students in their groups to find out their opinions.

“Listen up listen up!” Kurian keeps trying to quiet everyone down. He wants them to have one conversation, people from different places share out. He says he’s going to speak for strongly disagree since nobody is over there. He clarifies that he’s just playing devil’s advocate. “Quiet quiet quiet.” He says marijuana is illegal, so it would send a message that it’s okay to do illegal things. It’s a gateway drug, people will start using other drugs like crack and heroin and then ruin their lives.

The students have their turn to talk now.

Marcus says people smoke cigarettes, those are legal, and statistics show cigarettes will kill you more than weed.

Luis says you can't get addicted to it.

Davonte says, "Weed don't do nothing but keep you calm."

Another student says people should have a choice.

Kendrick says, "It's stress relief, especially for African Americans." He adds that you can't OD on it and everyone does it.

Kurian puts the next statement up on the board. He tells them this one is different, it's about selling it, not smoking it.

The statement is "People should get locked up for selling weed."

The students move around. There are equal groups in strongly disagree and disagree.

There are two people in strongly agree and two people in agree.

The teacher says "oh there's a big shift, you were okay with people smoking but don't want people to sell it." He was standing close to me so I pointed out how it's worded, they moved accordingly (still don't want people to get in trouble).

"Oh yeah, sorry" and points out they are pretty much staying consistent, he was mistaken.

He tells them to figure out why they are where they are and figure out who will be their spokesperson.

There is lots of talking among the students again.

Krystal says that's how some people make their money.

Jamar says weed is good for you.

Omar says it's hard to find jobs; people are selling weed as a way to make money.

Elijah adds on that people are trying to support their families.

Another boy says if you're going to smoke it, where else are you going to get it from?

LeShaun, in the agree section, says people might sell it to little kids or to the wrong people.

Elijah responds, "That's what's happening now."

Kendrick says it should be like other states where it's been regulated and sold in stores.

Jamar says some kids start smoking at fourteen or under and start making bad decisions.

This was a somewhat chaotic discussion even though it is not fully captured in my field notes because I tried to focus on the "official" talk. There were lots of side conversations happening, maybe because the students were excited to have marijuana as the topic for the day. I think Kurian got a little bit frustrated because he had a hard time quieting the class down so that there could be one conversation in which people shared out. As an observer it was clear to me that students had lots of opinions on marijuana laws and were excited to talk about them, even if it was sprinkled with talk of their own usage. Kurian had designed this part of the lesson so student viewpoints were what mattered, and he also did not vilify them or pass moral judgment on drug use. The students clearly felt free to share their opinions. The focus of this lesson was on the unfairness of the drug laws and the unequal way they are enforced in Chicago. He designed this unit to focus on a critical analysis and did not spend any time talking about the ills of drug use.

The first part of this lesson was participatory and all about students' personal opinions. The second part of the lesson focused on reading and discussing an article, which among other things, gave statistics on marijuana arrests and convictions in Chicago. The following discussion is from my field notes later on in that same lesson, but in 2nd period:

Kurian draws their attention to the stats in this paragraph. There are ratios that say 15:1 Black to white arrests for possession, and 40:1 getting convicted. He wants to make sure they understand what that means. Students call out explanations that show they pretty much understand what those ratios mean (they say things like for every fifteen Black people arrested, one white person is arrested). Kurian says remember, everyone is using marijuana at the same rates, but not everybody's getting in trouble for it. (This fact was established on a day I was not there; he has referred back to that several times today.) Jeremy says there's not that many Black people in the United States, how do we get chosen (arrested) so much? Kurian says that's a good question. But remember, in Chicago black people are about a third of the city, so if everything was equal they would make up about a third of the arrests. But that's not what's happening.

A girl says she thinks the reason Black people get arrested is because they make it known they're doing it; white people are more low-key. The teacher asks do other people agree with that? (Some louder voices say yes.)

Then the teacher says what about this though? He points at paragraph projected on the smart board about a festival where whites were smoking out in public.

Tinesha says, Black people post pictures and videos on Instagram and Facebook (of smoking).

Some other students laugh.

Kurian says but posting a video isn't public. These people are out in public at a festival. Outside.

Jamese said something about a “little thug” Black person on the corner “cuz that’s who mostly selling weed” and “the police ride up; they’ll get him.” She says if it’s a white person on the corner the police probably won’t suspect them as much.

Kurian asks, “So you’re talking about racial profiling? The white person wouldn’t be suspected as much?” Jamese says yeah.

Kurian says to the whole class remember, we learned that every racial group sells it at about the same rate. If anyone is selling more it’s young white people. So don’t fall for that image, the stereotype that it’s all Black people selling drugs, because it’s not.

Often Kurian validated students when they shared opinions, even ones that seemed a little misguided. In this case Kurian pushes back more directly on Jamese and Tinesha when they give reasons why Black people might get arrested more. He told me in an interview that he pushed back more directly on them because they had already learned that was not true. He wanted to make sure this point hit home—the stereotype we are all familiar with of who uses and sells drugs is just not true. In 3rd period on that same day, Jamar said he thinks Black people smoke weed more than other races. Kurian tried to hammer the point for them too:

They don’t, right? That’s a fact. We learned about this last week. Let me explain again because it’s a stereotype. Jamar (to get his attention), this is one of the lies they put out there, and people believe it. When it comes to all drugs, whites use more drugs than anybody. When it comes to weed, everybody does it about the same. And that comes from government data.

This exchange is interesting because it shows that while student opinions were welcomed and conversation was a central part of the class, Kurian’s major goal was still to encourage a critical understanding of these drug laws. Kurian had to work to drill this point home (which shows how

pervasive these stereotypes are) so students could be in a place where they could be more critical of the laws. This was a common refrain for Kurian. He acknowledged that all of us are taught not to look further (than the people using or selling drugs, or people in gangs, which was part of their unit on income inequality). He wanted students to have the tools to engage in critical analysis. He told them flat out, “I’m teaching you this stuff so you can change it. Not just so you can be smart and impress your friends with how much you know about the world, but so we can actually try and do something.”

One of the other units that was taught in its entirety during my data collection was a unit on income inequality. On the day the unit was introduced Kurian posed the question to his class: Why doesn’t everyone have enough money to live a good life? Ninety-six percent of Mandela High School’s student population was considered low income so this unit clearly had relevance to the students’ lives. To illustrate the relevance, one day in class they were talking about the different levels in an ecological model and a student asked about unemployment checks. Kurian said he wasn’t sure how much unemployment checks actually were, but he knew it wasn’t a lot and people only get them for a period of time. Zenobia raised her hand and asked how come the money the government gives you is never enough? She went on to say that when her mom gets her checks it is never enough money for her family; they always run out before the next check comes.

Kurian’s focus was, once again, to foster a critical analysis. He told his students at the outset that we are taught to believe that people get rich through hard work, and therefore, if some people do not have enough money it is their own fault. He told them his goal was for students to learn about the systems that contribute to economic inequality in the United States. Kurian had a direction he wanted the class to move in, and his lessons were designed so that students came to

understand income inequality in a specific way, but the lessons still were designed to draw on students' experience and understanding of the world. They talked a lot about minimum wage and how difficult it was for families to survive on minimum wage salaries. They also talked about a living wage—there was a lesson I was present for where students did calculations based on average living costs in Chicago to decide how much an adult would need to make per hour to take care of themselves and two kids with no government assistance. Kurian had the students make their own decisions about what would seem reasonable to them. Most of them came up with hourly wages of somewhere between thirty and fifty dollars an hour, based on what they decided was a reasonable standard of living (for example, Mimi said the kids don't need iPhones; they would be okay with pre-paid phones).

In one lesson Kurian was giving notes on what happened in cities where living wage laws were passed. Omar was convinced that if hourly wages were raised, workers would get fired. This is how the discussion happened, in 3rd period:

Kurian asks if anyone knows what state has the highest minimum wage? He says it's on the West Coast. Kids guess California. He tells them Washington State, where Seattle is. He tells them the city of Seattle made \$15/hour their minimum wage. He says they are going to look at that tomorrow, see how Seattle did that. There's no set amount for what a living wage is, it varies. Jabari asks so even sixteen-year-olds who work at McDonalds make that \$15? Kurian says he isn't sure if there are exceptions, but as far as he knows. Sometimes there are loopholes though. Elijah mumbles, "There's a loophole to every law."

After Kurian gives the definition of living wage for students to write down he asks the class, so who would be against it?

Kendrick calls out, “The people who’s at the top.”

Kurian says right, exactly, business owners, capitalists. And he says they don’t want to raise the minimum wage. He puts up a slide that has bulleted reasons for why they would be against it.

He asks why would they want to fire workers?

Omar says because you can’t have a lot of workers and pay them all a lot of money.

Kurian restates Omar’s answer so everyone can hear.

Elijah says if you’re a billion dollar corporation it won’t hurt your profits.

Kurian tells the class Elijah is right, he’s questioning whether the arguments the business owners make are true. Kurian says we need to investigate.

When Kurian says the dollar menu will turn into a \$3 menu Marcus says nobody’s gonna pay \$3 for a burger. Kurian laughs and tells him he’s right.

They move on to the part in the notes about the cities that have passed the living wage laws. Kurian says, let’s see what happened there.

Omar said something about only a couple of jobs would be hiring; they would need to fire people (with a higher minimum wage).

Kurian asks if everybody is ready to move on. A couple of kids say no, they are still writing notes.

Kurian goes over the first point. “Workers quit less, why?”

One student says because they’re making enough to survive. Another student says because they worked harder. Omar adds on that they worked harder because there were less people working.

Kurian laughs, tells the class Omar still thinks they fired people. But they worked harder because they wanted to, why would that be?

Luis says because if you're only getting paid \$8.25 an hour people feel like "Oh man, this is little money, why should I work at all?" But if they are getting paid \$12 an hour they feel better about their work.

Kurian agrees, and gave the example of Wal-mart, and how their low wages make it hard for employees to feel like "I'm gonna work hard for Wal-mart!"

When Kurian starts talking about how people spend more when they make more, Omar has kind of a light bulb moment. Kurian says when people spend more money that that makes the businesses happy—Omar interjects with "ohhhhhhh!"

Kurian, seemingly pleased that Omar finally believes him, says, "Exactly!"

Kurian emphasizes that businesses like it when people spend more, so it's good for businesses too.

The comments students made demonstrate the understanding they had about workers, wages, and cost of goods. Luis understood that if workers are paid more, they are more likely to be motivated to do a good job. Marcus rejected the idea that businesses would just raise their prices because, as he put it, "nobody's going to pay \$3 for a burger" from McDonalds. Omar had a difficult time believing higher wages would work out, and instead of Kurian trying to convince Omar from the beginning, he validated Omar's skepticism. In the other class, Aubrey brought up the hardship that small businesses might face in raising wages (compared to a huge corporation like Wal-mart). Kurian agreed that this was a valid point. The tone that Kurian set in class was not one of "I am the knower. Listen so you can know what I know," but rather "here is some

information that maybe you haven't heard before. Let's see what we think about this together and how it might help us think about this problem in a different way."

Chicago is often (falsely) talked about in the media as the murder capital of the United States. Many of the students believe this to be true—partly because they are exposed to the same media coverage as everyone else and partly because many of them live in neighborhoods where violence is commonplace. One day in the class I played a more active role in 5th period; I ended up getting into a long discussion with one student who was adamant that the lack of police presence was part of the problem in her neighborhood. She argued that the police were never around, and they knew what was going on (e.g., selling drugs, gang presence) but allowed it to happen because they did not care. In her view, more police who actually did their job WAS part of the solution. Kurian had a unit focused on investigating the root causes of violence in Chicago. One day he passed out laminated maps of Chicago neighborhoods along with statistics from the city of Chicago on homicide rates—namely the neighborhoods with the highest homicide rates and the neighborhoods with the lowest homicide rates. Students found the neighborhoods on the map and marked them—the low homicide rates with circles and the high homicide rates with triangles (this revealed easy-to-see patterns between violent crime and neighborhood segregation). They then looked at other statistics for those neighborhoods—poverty rates, unemployment rates, and per capita income. This is the discussion they had at the end of class that day in 2nd period:

Kurian asks, Why do you think the neighborhoods with high poverty, high unemployment, lower incomes have a lot of violence? James says because they're unemployed, they spend a lot of time outside because they don't have anything else to do.

Kurian said good point, they have a lot of free time so, you're outside. "Somebody build on that."

Samantha says when they're outside they get involved with gangs and do something illegal to make money because you don't have a job.

Kurian asks was this question fairly obvious to them? There is a chorus of yeses. He says for a lot of people the answer is not that obvious. He asks if they remember the day in class where they looked at the comments people left on YouTube. Several students say yeah, they remember. He said they don't put those pieces together—they say what's wrong with the Black parents in these neighborhoods, why don't they raise their kids right? They don't see the connections on all these levels.

Kurian goes on to say, so when someone gets killed and you see the suspect's face on the news, we just see the individual and think oh, they're a bad person because they murdered someone. The rest of all this is not obvious. Even some of the people who live in these neighborhoods don't put the pieces together. You gotta look deeper to see why do people do what they do.

We gotta get other people to understand this stuff too. I don't hear a lot of talk about fixing up neighborhoods. I hear a lot of talk about more cops. But I don't hear anybody talking about we need more jobs in these neighborhoods, we need higher incomes. A lot of people don't get this or they choose to ignore it.

The students understood the link between unemployment, high concentrations of poverty, and participation in gangs and other illegal activity. Kurian wanted the students to see how their understanding pushes back against the way much of mainstream society defines "the problem" of violence as well as the proposed solutions. This unit coincided with the mayoral election in

Chicago. Kurian helped students write a petition and post it on change.org. The petition addressed the mayoral candidates and said:

Statistics show that the neighborhoods with the most violence are suffering from the highest poverty and unemployment. Black unemployment in Chicago is around 25% and has not changed in the last four years under Rahm Emanuel. Without jobs, people have to find a means to make income. Some choose illegal and violent ways. A lot of fighting, hustling, and killing that happens in Chicago is to get money.

This petition connects what they were learning about in class to direct action. He posted the petition on Facebook and encouraged all his students to sign it, even typing up directions for how to sign it and giving them permission to take out their phones in class to get on Facebook and sign the petition.

What I have tried to demonstrate in this section is that Kurian and his students worked together in class to come to a critical understanding about issues that directly impact their lives. This process was not always perfect. I am not trying to paint a picture of a utopian social justice classroom (this is discussed more in the next chapter). Kurian did not position himself as the expert in the room but rather as a facilitator and participant. Student contributions were sought out and valued. Rather than pushing his own analysis onto them, Kurian created space for students to draw their own conclusions.

Conclusion

To make schools truly caring institutions for members of historically oppressed subordinate groups . . . authentic caring, as currently described in the literature, is necessary but not sufficient. Students' cultural world and their structural position must

also be fully apprehended, with school-based adults deliberately bringing issues of race, difference, and power into central focus. (Valenzuela, 1999, pg. 109)

Kurian was countering the dominant way US History gets taught—which is linear and generally a story of progress (i.e., the United States used to do some bad stuff, but look how much better it's gotten!). The bulk of his course while I was there was focused on current problems that students have personal experience with (mass incarceration/criminalization, economic inequality), and he tied those social problems to a history of racism and capitalism. Rolon-Dów (2005) argued that “to care for students of color in the United States, we must seek to understand the role that race/ethnicity has played in shaping and defining the sociocultural and political conditions of their communities” (p. 104). This is exactly what Kurian did on a daily basis in his US History classroom.

The way Kurian's curriculum was enacted in the classroom embodies the kind of teaching Valenzuela called for. Kurian communicated to his students that he cared about them and respected their agency through the topics they discussed in class and the way they discussed them. This made students feel connected to him and his class. Davonte told me, “He actually a fun, cool teacher . . . cuz the stuff that he teach and stuff.” That Kurian talked with his students about drug use and gangs without the typical “just say no” mentality that is typical of many adults is important. This contributed to students feeling like Kurian understood where they were coming from—even though he did not grow up in similar circumstances.

In the next chapter I investigate the way school as an institution places regulations on the roles of teachers and students and how the teachers and students at Mandela navigated those roles.

Chapter 6

Frustrations, Patience, and Forward Thinking: Analyzing the Complexities Inherent in Teacher-Student Relationships

Schools as an institution (e.g., this is not particular to Mandela High School or any one school) are focused on control (Foucault, 1977; Ferguson, 2000). Ferguson explained, “Conformity to the rules is treated by school adults as the essential prior condition for any classroom learning to take place” (pp. 51-52). In a banking view of education, students are in school to be taught the things that they need to know and do not already know (Freire, 1970). In order for that to happen, they first need to follow the rules—namely, sit quietly, move around the building in an orderly manner, and listen. Teachers are part of this institution; the imperative to be constantly policing student compliance is part of their job. Even for teachers like Kurian Joseph and Amir Chappelle who do not buy into this as their main goal in interacting with students, the pressure from administration to “manage” the kids is always there. Oftentimes students’ expressions of agency are interpreted by the institution as misbehavior and students are punished accordingly (Foucault, 1977). As I will discuss later on in this chapter, students can end up feeling like they have to make a choice between conformity to an oppressive, dominant culture and maintaining a sense of self, which has detrimental effects on their grades in class (Willis, 1977; Ferguson, 2000).

Throughout the course of my data collection, I felt simultaneously inspired by the great things going on at Mandela—in Kurian’s classroom and elsewhere—and frustrated. I was frustrated by small things, like when students weren’t paying attention to things that seemed so relevant and interesting. I listened to the things the students and teachers talked to me about. I thought about how even in a place like Mandela where so many adults are genuinely trying to

engage and help students empower themselves, the day-to-day realities often fall short of the goals. There are complexities inherent in teacher-student relationships; the nature of school (and society) as an institution structures these relationships in ways that must be navigated. This chapter explores the boundaries of the teacher needing to be the authority in the classroom and needing to connect with the students, and how my participants tried to make sense of them.

First I discuss issues of teacher authority: how students described their views on the role of authority in the classroom, the exertion of authority over cell phones, along with the major ways in which teachers attempted to negotiate the power dynamics (e.g., use of humor in the classroom and being open with students). Then I turn to the murkiness that students described to me in terms of the ways they felt like their relationships with their teachers were tied up with their success or failure in their classes. Finally, I analyze major teacher frustrations that I noticed and asked Kurian and his colleague, Amir Chappelle, about. I argue in this chapter that there is a balancing act teachers have to play in the classroom between being the authority in the room and being laid back. It is difficult to maintain this balance, and teachers who are able to do it do so because they have particular views of the students they teach (who, in turn, have particular views toward them) and their roles vis-à-vis their students; they actively resist their roles as enforcers of compliance. This chapter draws on field notes from Kurian's classes as well as interviews with Kurian, Amir, and my focal students.

In the following interview excerpt, Amir told me a story about something that happened between him and a student (Kendrick, also one of my focal students) in his class. Amir told me this story after I was done asking all my main questions, as a way to illustrate challenges he faced on an on-going basis in terms of negotiating respect with his students and the difficulty that goes along with maintaining relationships with students.

Amir: So, and what I was talking about with respect, so like Kendrick. He's my prime example. He and I got into it a few weeks ago.

Karla: Okay.

Amir: And he said to me, he said, so 7th period was kinda weird. They were taking a test but like Kendrick was really off. He was walking around the room.

Karla: Yeah.

Amir: And he walked up to me and he said—no, he was walking and his test was blank. And I said are you turning your test in? And I had a little attitude. Are you turning your test in? And he was like, "What it look like motherfucker?"

Karla: He said that to you in class?

Amir: Yeah, right there.

Karla: Did he say it loud enough for the rest of the kids to hear?

Amir: Yes!

Karla: Ohhhh, okay.

Amir: So then whew! The street flares up in me.

Karla: (laughing)

Amir: Right, "Who you calling a motherfucker?" "I'm calling you a motherfucker, what you gon do about it?"

Karla: Wow!

Amir: Like wanted to, you know, and I said you are so lucky you know, like you protected by this, you KNOW I can't do nothing to you. Right?

Karla: Right.

Amir: So don't put me there, don't take me there, right? He said, "You still talking, you still talking," that's what he's saying to me, right? Now, Kendrick and I have a—we have a hot and cold relationship, but we have a GOOD relationship.

One thing that this exchange illustrates is the complex nature of teacher-student relationships. I am aiming to describe complex interactions between teachers and students. It is not as simple as being a "good" teacher means only "good" things happen in his classroom. Kendrick told me he liked Amir Chappelle a lot, but Kendrick was still human, with good days and bad days, as was Amir. So even for a teacher who is widely respected and liked by his students as Amir was, this does not mean things will go perfectly in every interaction with every student every day. These relationships are complex. Amir, however, did not write Kendrick off for the rest of the year, as he described next.

Amir: And so, nothing had happened to him [he didn't get in trouble for the incident]. And so that week had gone by and like in my class he was putting his head down. You could tell he wanted to say something to me but he didn't, like he wouldn't say nothing. Like he was just real like, distant. And so, this whole week gone by so that Monday, 2nd period, he came to me. . . . And he came into the room and was like Mr. Chappelle, I been wanting to talk to you all week but you seem like you ain't wanna talk to me (laughing), that's what he said, right? . . . But he was like, it really bothered me that you and I um, had got into it like that. I was like, wow. You know what I'm saying?

Karla: Yeah.

Amir: So he was big enough to come to me and be honest But yeah, that's just an example of, of how relationships evolve.

Karla: Yeah.

Amir: Throughout a school year, you know.

Karla: Right. And how having a GOOD relationship does not mean that everything is gonna be gravy every day.

Amir: Riiiiight, right.

This story that Amir recounted to me seemed fitting for the introduction of this chapter because it demonstrates the need for teachers (and students) to have perseverance in order to navigate daily classroom relationships. It also demonstrates the complexities involved in both one-on-one teacher-student relationships and daily teaching. Being a “good” teacher does not mean issues like this one just described with Kendrick would never come up; rather it is about how a teacher responds. It also points to the looming issues of teacher authority and student agency.

Student and Teacher Views on Issues of Power and Authority

There are many complex aspects to the nature of teacher-student relationships. These relationships are not context-free; they exist within the institution of school. One of the inescapable issues is the role of power and authority in teacher-student interactions. I came into this project with strong opinions on ways teachers often attempt to exert power over students—ways that often create and exacerbate conflicts. My focal students also brought up issues of power and authority in every interview. They clearly had strong opinions on the roles they believed their teachers should play. The following table (table 6.1) highlights student comments on the role of teacher authority in the classroom.

Table 6.1 Student comments about teacher authority

Teachers need to be the authority	Teachers need to strike a balance
<p>“6th or 5th grade and I’m like, you letting some little kids make you cry. Like, and I know a lot of teachers be stressed out about working in the schools and stuff like that but if you gon cry, if you gon be all soft then you, I don’t think you should do this.”</p> <p>Mimi</p>	<p>“I don’t wanna say that students and teachers should have equal power . . . But it’d be nice if they showed us a little bit of respect and power . . . And, what he was saying is that the class needs to be controlled before they let us into that circle”</p> <p>Kendrick</p>
<p>“It’s the way that they act. Cuz some teachers like, they’ll say they’ll write you up but then you get suspended for this but then you’ll be back the next day so they think they can keep doing it over and over . . . without getting in trouble”</p> <p>Davonte</p>	<p>“It’s better when the teacher, when you have a friendship with the teacher. But you still know, like that’s my teacher so I still gotta respect them but it’s still like, you know when the teacher is playful. You know, like playing and still learning is the key too.”</p> <p>Samantha</p>
<p>“I believe that first the teacher has to obtain dominance to the class . . . They gotta prove they’re alpha . . . If you start the class playing around then the class is gonna take you as a joke”</p> <p>Luis</p>	<p>“I think they gotta learn how to bring the class back. Like if one person, if the teacher tell a joke and then all the side conversations start, everybody start chit chatting, you gotta learn how to bring the class back to your attention, to teach, not let it go on with the jokes”</p> <p>Tinesha</p>
<p>“Maybe with a student that’s like, obnoxious, just loud in the classroom, cursing, stuff like that, and then like, tell them first give them a warning. And then, if they don’t listen then be like excuse me, whatever the name is, um, I asked you, I warned you before, you need to stop. And then the 3rd time, don’t start yelling and screaming at them”</p> <p>Jamese</p>	<p>“Cuz it’s like during the class they’ll have to become like another person or something. They think they the boss of all the whole class”</p> <p>LeShaun</p>

These student comments represent a range of perspectives on the role of the teacher.

Students were unequivocal about the teacher needing to be the authority in the room. They talked about how teachers should be tough (e.g., Mimi’s comment about if kids are going to make you cry maybe you should not be a teacher) and give people warnings and consequences or else kids would run over them. But they also talked about a need for balance—the ability to make jokes

and then bring the class back to the focus of the class, or to have authority but also share power with students.

Amir talked to me about how he struggles with authority a lot, and said if he was working in a different setting (i.e., not a school), his interactions with young people would look much different. He told me:

When you're not in compliance, when a student is not in compliance like that then it raises your anxiety level, right? Then you freak out. Then little things become big things, right? And you know, especially when you have this in your mind. Sometimes it's created on our own as teachers. But you know, what if [the principal] is walking past. Or, what if she walks in my room and she sees this, and so you freak out. And so um, I struggle with that, right? I struggle with that but I really try to work on that.

Amir spoke about balancing pressure from administration or even perceived pressure to be seen as an authority figure in his classroom. He said he worried that if an outsider came in and saw a student eating a bag of chips he would be perceived as someone who was not respected by his students. He also believed that he needed to make some concessions with his students in order to win them over. This is part of that delicate balance that students mentioned repeatedly.

I saw this happen in Kurian's class as well. I noticed early on in my observations that he would respond indirectly to students who were doing something he did not want them to do. For example, one day Jamar was talking and Kurian asked him to move across the room to a different seat. Jamar started protesting that he wasn't talking and Kurian responded quickly that he just can't see Jamar very well where he's sitting now, and could he move over so he can see him better. Jamar moved with no further protest. Another day Jacara, who sat right next to the white board, was erasing the things Kurian had written on the board and writing other things. At

one point Kurian told her not to worry about it, that he would take care of that. I asked him about it.

Karla: Can you tell me about how purposeful that is that you kind of approach kids that way or what thought process you have behind that?

Kurian: Yeah so I need them to stop a specific behavior.

Karla: Right.

Kurian: Ummm (pause) And there's certain—I mean the way you say that, it can lead to a reaction in different ways right, depending on how you say it.

Karla: Mmm hmm.

Kurian: Um, I don't know, it seems like I'm being indirect and the kids know it. Like they know what I mean, but I'm phrasing it in a way that's non-threatening or, you know, non-confrontational.

Karla: Mmm hmmm.

Kurian: Um, and sometimes it can be funny too.

Karla: Yeah.

Kurian: In a way it kinda gives them the benefit of the doubt, where I'm not accusing them of anything.

Karla: Yeah, so that's kinda what I—so it's kind of like you're letting them save face and you are, um, avoiding a possible escalation of—

Kurian: Yeah! Cuz then you know, their response could be “no, I'm not” or “I'm not doing that.”

Karla: Right, right.

Kurian: Yeah, I've had that happen before so I just (small laugh) avoid that path altogether and give them another way.

Kurian explained that he did not feel the need to demonstrate his power over the kids. The ways I saw him interact with students when he was taking a more authoritative stance support this: he almost always avoided direct confrontations and possible power struggles. Both Kurian and Amir believed that minimizing power struggles was ideal, but acknowledged that this is not always possible. The teachers were trying to fill multiple—and at times conflicting—roles, appeasing administrative expectations without alienating their students. Kurian told me that there was no way to get away from needing to be an authority in the classroom because this was school. He said he tried to operate from the position of authority on the side of the students, however. That was the way he tried to negotiate his role. He told me he tried to get the kids to understand that this is for us (he and the students), rather than authority just so he can be the boss and maintain institutional power. As I further describe later in this chapter, many of the instances I witnessed where he took on a more authoritative role were ones in which he felt that the content was particularly important and that the students NEEDED to pay attention, rather than instances he felt in which that the students owed him compliance.

Cell phones. One of the ongoing sources of power struggles between teachers and students was over cell phones. Many students have them and the rule in every school I've been in over the last few years is if the teacher sees the phone, they take it. I noticed at Mandela there was plenty of sneaking around with cell phones. Students checked them quickly, or held them under the desk to use them, etc. Sometimes in class a student would announce to Kurian that they were going to take their phone out real quick so they could turn it off (as a way to avoid getting it taken). As an observer I never said anything to a student or to Kurian about a student with a cell

phone. I got the sense that even with the phones there was selective enforcement of the rule because if a teacher tried to enforce that rule all the time it would amount to a lot of time spent policing students (Foucault, 1977). Kurian wanted to create a classroom culture where students were not running over him (something students clearly did not want, see comments in table 6.1), but students were also able to maintain their agency. Amir spoke about it too, while he was talking about balancing the pressures for compliance from administration with the need to win his students over. He said,

The phone thing. I'm gonna, you know, sometimes I act like I don't see you. If you're being slick and you're (made a motion like he's holding a phone under the desk, texting) you know, and then I gotta know maybe calling them out across the room is not the best thing to do. Maybe sliding over to them like "aye dude, put the phone up."

Kurian did similar things in class. One day at the beginning of 2nd period Kurian told Jeremiah to "put that in your pocket" (his phone was sitting underneath the front cover of his notebook). Jeremiah tried to act like he didn't know what Kurian was talking about, and said "Put what in my pocket?" and Kurian said "under your notebook." Jeremiah said, "Oh man! I can't believe you saw that!" and put it away. Kurian told him he was trying to keep him from getting the phone taken.

Kurian probably turned a blind eye to some visible cell phones but because they were so ubiquitous, letting too many slide would likely increase their usage in the classroom. There is that balance for the teacher as well—they have to "give" a little for the sake of the students but they can't risk someone from outside coming in and assuming the teacher has no control over the kids. In most of my observations of incidents over cell phones, student responses to getting caught were lighthearted. I think they felt like it was part of the game—if they get caught they

just gave it up and kind of laughed about it. Other students in the class would sometimes even laugh at the student who got caught, kind of like everybody has to take their turn getting caught. One day while students were working on their own and Kurian was walking around helping students, he caught Davonte with his phone out. All Kurian did was hold his hand out. Davonte smiled (I interpreted it to be like “Aw man, you got me!”) and handed his phone over. Then he asked Kurian if he could get it back real quick so he could turn it off. After Davonte turned it off, he handed it back to Kurian, who then locked it up in his closet. Generally he returned the phones to students at the end of the day. Those interactions happened fairly regularly (maybe once every other class that I witnessed); the entire exchanges were often quick and sometimes, as in this incident with Davonte, other students did not even know because it happened as a side conversation.

There were two different incidents I saw during my time observing where students did not want to give up their phones when caught. Krystal got caught with her phone out one day when there were only about ten minutes left in class. She did not want to give it up. When Kurian asked her to give it to him she said “Oh my God!” in a voice louder than her normal talking voice and said she had JUST taken it out. Kurian just said sorry and told her in what seemed to me a very calm voice (no traces of anger or impatience) that Krystal either had to give it to him or she had to go with security. She chose to go. Kurian used the intercom to call security—still not really bothered by the whole thing. There was no appearance of a power struggle, Kurian did not really spend a lot of time dealing with it. After he called for security he went back to walking around, helping students.

The ever-present cell phone issue was probably the most common example I noticed of potential power struggles between teacher and student. These examples I just described were

representative of the range of ways Kurian interacted with students over their phones. Most often he did not have to push very hard in order for students to comply (i.e., put their phones away or hand them over), but even in the rare instances where students refused to comply, Kurian's next steps did not escalate the conflict. His actions were consistent with what he told me about his views on the subject. He said, "I'm not an authoritarian figure. Like I don't come in, you know, needing to demonstrate my power or authority or control over kids." Kurian was very consistent with his students—he was laid back without being a pushover. He seemed to achieve the balance that the kids wanted—a teacher who was the authority in the room without feeling the need to exert that authority in extreme ways. This is because Kurian did not view his role as needing to control students. Ensuring student compliance was not his goal, so in practice this meant he worked to mitigate his authority. In the next section I discuss the use of humor as a strategy for mitigating authority.

Using humor to bridge the divide. The teachers and the students talked about how important it is for there to be some kind of personal connection—a disruption of the normal hierarchy that exists. The students often mentioned jokes as a way for teachers to bridge the divide between teachers and students. In classes I observed there were humorous interactions that were initiated by either the teacher or the students. Although Kurian relied more heavily on his curriculum as a way to connect with students (as discussed in the previous chapter), there were occasions in class (both in "official" class times and during "down" times) in which he would engage in joking/informal exchanges with the students. Fostering relationships between teachers and students necessitates bridging the divide that exists between them as structured by the institution of school. Creating relationships that went beyond the student-teacher dichotomy was a way to push back on the institutional norms that worked to strip students of their power. Kurian

had an explicit ideology about this, on the role that personal relationships played in his classroom. Kurian explained this to me in an interview:

So it's important to [get] the personal stuff out there too. So I mean, I try at the beginning of class when kids come in, yeah, and so that's like the kind of like, yeah low-key jokes I make or try to treat people or whatever . . . Yeah I'm not trying to make a scene out of it but I'm also trying to inject some levity into the situation a little bit. Cuz again, without any kind of personal connection, I mean like, nothing I say will matter anyway, right?

Kurian's statement shows that he believed inserting "some levity into the situation" helped the kids connect to him and to the content. Even though he believed that he primarily connected to students through his content, he thought that the use of humor with students helped also. The students frequently talked about Amir Chappelle and John Robinson as teachers who were the most humorous and cracked the most jokes. I did not do any observations in their classrooms to investigate what that looked like in their rooms, but I did ask Amir about it.

I truly believe that the humor gets me, it gets me in with the kids, right? . . . It strengthens the relationship, um, it makes them feel more comfortable in a setting they probably don't wanna be in half the time . . . Right, um, it gets them through the day, it gets me through the day. Right, and um, it just, and sometimes I think I may even sacrifice that authority presence right, for the sake of them—of me being on their level, right? You know, and for us to feel like okay, it's not teachers on top students on the bottom.

Similarly, Amir felt like his use of humor helped connect his students to him and to school, period. But he also talked about humor as a way of mitigating the power structure (teachers on top, students on the bottom) that exists in schools. Both students and teachers felt like humor had the effect of making teachers more relatable; it made them seem more like he's "one of us."

Kendrick [one of my focal students] explained what he meant by that (speaking specifically about Amir):

And what I mean by “one of us” I mean he’s—I’m not gonna say equal to us as a student in terms of a teacher but he actually cracks jokes, listens to our stories, what’s going on, who scored how much in that game.

This is the same student that Amir described in the excerpt at the beginning of the chapter, a reminder that a good relationship (as both Amir and Kendrick described their relationship with each other to me) does not equal smooth sailing every day. Every single student I talked to mentioned the use of humor as a key tool for building relationships and as one of the qualities that makes them like a teacher. One day the class (Kurian and his 2nd period students) were talking about the all-school trip to go see the movie *Selma*. The students had just found out they were going, so there was talk of logistics and students made various comments. Here is an excerpt from my field notes:

Jeremiah made a comment about MLK being dead, and we should leave him dead.

Mimi turns around and says “What?” and says she’ll stab him (for saying that). She gets up and kind of chases him around the desks, saying don’t say anything about MLK, she’ll beat him.

We are all laughing. Mimi is still making threats. Kurian guides her back to her seat (touching her shoulders but not in a forceful way—he’s laughing too) and says, “Martin Luther King wouldn’t want you to do that.”

These kind of lighthearted exchanges did not happen all the time in Kurian’s class, but they happened often enough that I believe they contributed to students feeling like Kurian was a laid-back teacher (another quality which was very important to them). I noticed that students would

also include Kurian in their own casual conversations, such as this one that happened in 3rd period a few days before Valentine's Day:

The boys in the front were talking with Kurian while students passed out papers. The boys were teasing Darius because he said he was going to take his girl to Chipotle for Valentine's Day. They were laughing, saying that was the same thing as going to McDonald's (i.e., a cheap date). Kurian was laughing at them, saying he thinks it's a step up from McDonalds, and as long as he buys her guacamole, he's good. They were all laughing about the whole thing.

This short conversation is important because it shows that Kurian's participation in the conversation was welcomed. They were laughing and joking together, and Kurian's participation in the exchange was like that of a peer. He was not giving out dating advice or words of wisdom; his turn in the conversation was equally joking and casual. This conversation happened with a group of boys that all sat in the front (assigned seats)—Aaron, Darius, Jabari, and Omar.

Because Kurian often stood in the front of the room, he would sometimes have short, casual exchanges with them like this one during transition times. Usually the boys would be talking with each other and Kurian would join in, either voluntarily or because one of the boys would ask him for his input. These are times when the humor or peer-like interactions would happen as side conversation. Sometimes they also happened in a whole class format. For example, one day the students were taking notes on the Gilded Age (as part of the unit on capitalism and income inequality) and Kurian was talking about Rockefeller and Carnegie and how they got rich.

Kurian explained, "with this money Rockefeller had a lot of power or clout." The kids in the class started laughing because clout is a word they use to describe someone's "power" in the street or popularity on social media (e.g., how many friends someone has on Facebook or how

many “likes” they get on an Instagram post).⁵ Kurian told them clout has meaning other than how they use it. He told them they could use it in an essay for class and their teacher would think “good word!” Kurian was using his familiarity with students’ use of the word to make a connection to the content.

The students appreciated humor, and they also appreciated humor that was at the expense of a student in class. When I asked what teachers did to try and build relationships with students, Devin explained,

Make jokes. Like uh, [Amir] Chappelle and [Kurian] Joseph and [John] Robinson. They always wanna make jokes. Talk about like, they don’t make fun of a person THAT much, they’ll be like, they’ll try to like, a person have to start it for like, to have a comeback joke and they’ll make it funny, you just see like, this teacher is cool.

According to Devin (and what I saw in class), students love when a teacher is able to make a good “comeback joke” or “treat” a kid in class. One day in class when students were working independently and Kurian was walking around helping, Justin got up to throw a plastic bottle in the garbage. He stood a few feet back and shot it like a basketball, and he missed. Kurian said, “Forget about basketball, Justin.” The whole class was in an uproar because Kurian “treated” Justin! Kurian then added on, “That was my fault, he needs it absolutely silent to make it,” which was another low-key joke at Justin’s expense. The class got a kick out of moments like that—the students made fun of each other all the time, so a teacher getting in on the action (and doing it well) made students feel like he was making an effort to be “one of us.” These ways of mitigating authority through humorous exchanges without relinquishing it altogether functioned

⁵ Exploring gang culture in Chicago is outside the scope of this paper, but it is safe to assume that students were laughing because they are familiar with both colloquial uses of the word.

as a way to negotiate power dynamics with the students. These practices sent a message to the students that Kurian did not feel the need to control their behavior in class at all times, and the students, according to what they told me, appreciated it.

Students also did some of the joke initiating in class. One day in class they were discussing the ways people are able to become rich. They were making a list of things that included family wealth and the field/job you go into. Kurian was trying to get them to think about other rich people they would be familiar with and how they got there. The following excerpt is from my field notes:

Kurian says, “Well, what does it take to get to the NBA? Besides hard work, do you need anything else?”

The class is kind of quiet; some students say no.

Other girls are saying going to certain schools helps you get to the NBA.

Kurian tells them that’s a good point and says he’s not explaining it very well. He says to be an actor or get in the NBA you need talent and skill. He said he could quit teaching and dedicate his life to basketball (the kids laugh, I laugh) and do they think he would make it to the NBA? It’s about skill or talent. Some people are just not athletic. Some of them play sports and think they’re athletic but they just aren’t that talented; they won’t make it.

Devin says, “I don’t understand why you’re looking at me though.” Everyone laughs. As an observer, there was something about the moments where students made the jokes that made me feel that a familial atmosphere had been created. In that example, Devin was making a joke at his own expense, which is a very vulnerable thing to do. Some of that had to do with his personality, but it also says something about the culture of the class. Kurian fostered a culture

where humorous exchanges like the ones described here could take place, and students felt comfortable enough to participate in and initiate these exchanges. Kurian did not feel that a classroom culture that made space for humor was a threat to his authority; rather he understood how it helped students feel more connected to him and to the class.

Being open. Students told me that another way they thought teachers built relationships with them was through being open about their own lives. This is another aspect of achieving a balance between teacher authority and being laid back and personable. Samantha said,

Instead of putting on that mask like, “I’m a teacher so I do all good”—you know, like that. Because when I was younger I used to think teachers just teach, they don’t do nothing, they don’t have a life, nothing. And then when I got to high school I started seeing different personalities Because I used to think teachers was robots when I was little (laughing).

Students want their teachers to be genuine with them—to show that they have a personality outside of just being the teacher in the room. Jin talked about this also in our interview, when he was talking about teachers who do well building rapport with the kids versus teachers who do not do so well.

Jin: So building rapport, it’s a tricky thing. Some people do it with just personality. We even had one time, one of our interview questions for prospective teachers was do you have flavor?

Karla: (laughing)

Jin: (smiling) This was an actual question. John’s question. We worked together. And it drew laughs but—

Karla: How did teachers respond, or how did prospective teachers respond to it—

Jin: It varied. I don't really remember. Some of them gave real dry answers and some of them said "I got a personality, I do this." And you know, first of all, that the teacher knows what flavor meant, but understood that flavor doesn't mean that you have to be eccentric. Just be who you are.

Karla: mmm hmmm

Jin: And you can kind of be who you are. I play guitar, I play in a band, you know, these are the things that I do.

Karla: Right.

Jin: You got an in already with kids with music. I like to travel, I like to eat different foods, I'm quirky, something that makes you not this plain-Jane type. Vanilla. You know, middle of the road kind of person. You don't want that flat affect. You want somebody that's—"bubbly" is a bad word—but just very enthused with what they're doing.

Jin made interesting points because his opinion was that as long as teachers are able to bring their personality and personal interests into the classroom they can build rapport with students—it is not dependent on teachers and students sharing the same background, but rather on teachers being genuine and open. Luis (focal student) talked about this also,

As long as they understand me, we cool. But at the same time I like to get to know the different styles of teachers cuz at the same time like, even though they might not understand where I come from or what I been through in life, I could probably, you know, shed some light. You know, to make them see through my perspective If they're willing to like listen to what I gotta say—then I'll be willing to like, listen to what they gotta say and see what they see.

Luis was talking about being open in terms of teachers being willing to listen to students and share aspects of themselves with students. This is all a part of “taking off the mask” and not being simply an authority figure in the classroom.

Amir thought this was one of the reasons, in addition to his humor, that students tended to like him. He said,

And I let 'em into my world, right. I'll tell them like personal stories about me and [oldest son's] relationship right, you know what I'm saying? . . . Even me and my wife's relationship, right? . . . So I let 'em in my world. And you know, like I don't have anything—I think it's cuz I don't have anything to hide either You know, I don't have a secret life, you know what I'm saying?

I did not observe Kurian be open with his students in this way. I heard him mention his daughter once when he was talking about the movie *Frozen* in relationship to the existence of ice before refrigerators. I did not sit in on Amir's class but I get the sense (from what he and the students told me in interviews) that he was generally more open about his personal life than Kurian was. I think this partly ties back to Kurian's self-imposed sense of urgency about his curriculum (he did not think there was time for other stuff), and it also has to do with personality differences. He talked to me about the differences he notices:

Where some teachers—and it could just be a personality difference too, like students on a social level connect with more, just have more of a personal relationship with—and I don't have that. And part of me feels bad, like I wish I did. I don't see that occurring within the class time because I don't feel like there's time for it, right? And maybe there's a way I can do both, right? Cuz I think of teachers, like Mr. [Amir] Chappelle. He

has a great relationship right? And I envy that, and I wish I could do that. Because I feel like I could also be a more effective teacher if I figured that out.

Kurian's self-assessment was consistent with what I observed. Connecting this back with Luis's comments on the previous page, even if Kurian was not very open with his students in terms of sharing things about his personal life, he was open in the sense that he listened to students and was interested in their experiences. Communicating genuine interest in students' lives is part of being open.

Conclusion. Schooling, as an institution, is inextricably tied to issues of power and authority. Students want teachers who are able to maintain their authority but also be laid-back, and achieving this balance is a struggle. Kurian and Amir talked about struggling to find a balance between enforcing school rules and letting things slide for the sake of getting in with students. The use of cell phones illustrates an ever-present line towing—kids pushing boundaries and teachers selectively enforcing rules. Building relationships with students, however, also necessitates trying to bridge the student-teacher gap that schooling creates. Kurian and Amir, to varying extents, attempt to do this through the use of humor and being open with students—both of which are valued by the students I interviewed. I return to this discussion of authority later on in this chapter when I talk about teacher frustrations, but first I want to explore students' perceptions on how their grades are tied to their relationships with their teachers.

“Without Any Type of Connection with the Teacher You Can't Do Nothing”

The students I interviewed believed that getting good grades was dependent on having good relationships with teachers. When I asked students if they thought it was important for them to have good relationships with their teachers, many of them connected relationships with grades. Davonte (focal student) said:

If you one of the people that don't try to talk to your teacher or ask them for help and stuff and then when you really need it they probably won't even try and talk to you, they just tell you to figure it out on your own If you one of the people that just, not even just sit by theyself but just joke around all day and don't wanna get your work done, but then when it's really time for you to try and bring your grade up then you ask them for extra credit or something they'll tell you no.

Davonte is explaining how students' grades can suffer if they do not have a good connection with their teacher. Davonte places the onus on the students, however. He believes that students who "just joke around all day" then lose out on a chance to get help when they really need it. Davonte believes that students who consistently show that they are trying are more likely to get help. Mimi, whom I interviewed with Davonte, agreed. She added on,

without any type of connection with the teacher you can't do nothing. You know, and a lot of students like you said, a lot of students sit down and do nothing and when they actually do try to help you you goofing around playing around so it make them not wanna help you when you actually want help. Cuz they gon' feel like when I go over there and help them they ain't gonna wanna do it or whatever.

Both of them are making the point that if a student plays too much in class, the teacher will then not be willing to help if the student eventually asks for it. Kendrick (focal student) also talked about how a bad relationship could also affect a student's grade in the class.

When they see a teacher they don't like, yeah of course they get the work done but at the same time like man, I'm not doing her work because I don't like her! It's not affecting the teacher, it's affecting themselves. I've seen it happen plenty of times.

Davonte, Mimi and Kendrick placed the responsibility with the students—their view was that students are hurting themselves by choosing to spend their time goofing off or choosing to refuse to do work. This could also be interpreted as students’ ways of responding to institutional power, however. Students may feel like the only way they have to maintain their agency is to resist conforming to the institution (Willis, 1977).

Other students made comments to me about teachers deliberately lowering the grades of students they do not like. Whether or not teachers actually do this is not the primary concern—that students perceive this to be happening is enough. Students clearly felt that a teacher’s willingness to help was dependent on whether or not the teacher and student had a good relationship. So it is not surprising that all the students I talked to also said teachers’ willingness to help them when they needed it was one of the things that made them like a teacher—it was one of the ways they believed teachers showed that they cared. Elijah told me, “I like Mr. Rodriguez, my Spanish teacher. Cuz like he’ll help me out with some Spanish work I don’t know . . . [but] Mr. Rodriguez can’t make me laugh.” Devin, in a different interview, said something similar about Mr. Rodriguez. He said, “He’s like an understanding person, like he takes his time. Even, that’s a Spanish class and he know I don’t get Spanish for nothing so he gon’ take his time and, like, help me out.”

Even when students talked about liking teachers for being funny, it was never all about being funny. Tinesha said, “Like Mr. Robinson, he funny. But he make sure we get our work done.” Students’ perception of help is related to the idea of striking a balance between being an authority and being laid back. It is important to stress that student descriptions of teachers they liked, teachers who showed they care were always tied to teachers being willing to help them,

put in extra time, and take the time to explain things in class. Humor and other aspects of being laid back did not exist in isolation in the students' views of what made a "good" teacher.

Students felt like good, caring teachers were those who helped them with their work. I did not interview any teachers specifically about their views on helping, but I am familiar with teachers (myself included) feeling frustrated with students who are not doing their part and thus treating students differently (e.g., not willing to help, not giving every student extra chances or extra time, evaluating students based on teachers' perceptions of who is "trying"). I mentioned this tendency for teachers to give up on students when they feel like the students are not doing enough. The students, however, describe the high value they place on teachers' willingness to help. Teachers have to push past temporary frustrations they might feel with students in order to always provide them with the support they want, or risk students completely checking out (as described by student comments in this section). In order for this to happen, teachers must view their role as someone who is there for students all the time. This is clearly the role that Kurian took on in class, as described next.

Kurian was helping students at all times that I observed. I don't think I ever saw him sit down. When students were working independently or in groups he constantly walked around, answering questions and offering guidance. One day when students were working on answering questions using text evidence Kurian looked at Davonte (who sat in the back) and put his thumb up and then his thumb down (non-verbally asking Davonte if he was good or not). Davonte shook his head (not good) and Kurian then went back to help him. This exchange was brief but it demonstrated both Kurian's sincere attempts at offering help and Davonte's willingness to accept his help.

Kurian structured his class in a way that was participatory but also so students could be supported academically. I asked Kurian in a of couple informal conversations about why he relied on a whole class format so often (e.g., whole class discussion, reading a piece of text together, etc.) and he told me part of it was definitely as a way to make sure all the students could access the information. There were several students with Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) in that class, and I think he was concerned that they would not be able to comprehend some of the written text if he had them read independently. I know he struggled with this, however. He also felt like doing so much stuff together meant that students knew they didn't have to pay attention, they could just look up and write down what he wrote down and be okay. Sometimes when he felt like too many people were not paying attention, he would not write down the things they discussed. They still usually went over stuff together (e.g., Kurian would ask student volunteers to share what they wrote down). I know sharing as a consistent part of class was done partly because his goal was to discuss things together and try to come to common understandings. But it was also done as a way to help students who he thought would find the work too challenging if done independently.

When students were working independently (or in groups) Kurian walked around constantly. One thing that I was impressed with was the respectful way he helped students. He never showed impatience when students asked questions repeatedly, or asked him something they could find out on their own (e.g., something that was written on the paper in front of them). One day in the computer lab they were looking up information on their city, state, and local elected officials and a student asked him the name of the mayor. Kurian did not respond by saying "You don't know who the mayor of Chicago is?" (that is probably what I would have said!) Instead he said, oh my fault, I should have put that on the paper. And told her.

I asked the students in interviews what they thought made a good relationship between the teacher and students. Samantha (focal student) said:

When um, the teacher even though like if the student is failing or the student is like close to failing, they do all they can to make sure that they're on task. That they're making up stuff that they didn't have, like give a little leeway—cuz like, being comfortable, the student might come up to the teacher like look, I'm having trouble, like this is distracting me. You know like cuz people have trouble at home and all that. And so like um, a good relationship is when you're able to let your teacher know what's going on and stuff.

Samantha addressed multiple aspects of help as connected to teacher-student relationships. She thought it was important that teachers help in the sense of giving extra support to students who may be having trouble keeping up in class, but she also said that means there has to be open lines of communication so a student feels comfortable talking to a teacher about that kind of stuff.

Mimi, in a separate interview, said the same kind of thing. She said good teachers are ones who “talk to you about personal situations like if you need somebody or an adult to talk to.” Mimi also said she liked teachers who pushed her. She said,

Like, they be on you about everything like for instance Mr. Chappelle. I know you said don't say no names but, for instance Mr. Chappelle. Like every time I come in his classroom he like “Mimi, get on it.” Like, he always making sure that I'm on task and you know, stuff like that, and that's what I like about them.

Similar to Samantha, Mimi said when teachers push her that's when she feels like “they actually care.” Mimi acknowledged that even though she cited teachers who pushed her as something she likes about teachers sometimes, in the moment, she does not appreciate being pushed. I interviewed Mimi and Davonte together, and Davonte did not agree with Mimi. He told

me that when teachers “stay on you a lot, that irritates me.” He explained that he has anger problems, so being pushed is not the best way for teachers to show him they care—it just makes him mad. (I never witnessed any of Davonte’s anger problems, so I was surprised he described himself this way.) This is an important point—there is not one way to be with every single student, or even one student every day. This is part of why good teaching (or a good ethnography) is not prescriptive.

Samantha described a situation where there is a fractured relationship:

Um, okay so for example it’s a teacher in here, I had her last year. She, we’ll be in class or whatever and it’s more favoritism too. Okay, I need help I need help but you’re constantly ignoring me, and you wonder why my grades are so low, because I’m asking you for help, but you’re not—versus a good teacher that’s like okay, this student needs help, I’m gonna give everybody a chance instead of going to that same person multiple times, giving people a chance to say what they gotta say. Then, when we turn around to our friends and ask them how do we do this, how do you do this, then it’s a problem.

Samantha talked about a teacher she had the year before at Mandela, who, according to Samantha, was playing favorites and wouldn’t help Samantha when she needed it. I do not know which teacher she was referring to so I did not get that teacher’s perspective but I also do not believe establishing “what was really going on” is important here. What is important is that students feel like teachers should be willing to help everyone, and when students feel that is not happening, they feel like the teacher does not care. They then react, whether it be to disengage or stop asking for help.

Noddings (1992) stated that if a student does not feel cared for, despite a teacher’s intentions, then the teacher’s job is not done. In situations where a student is complaining that a

teacher does not want to help them, the teacher may have a different version of the story. My point is that the goal should not be to establish who is “at fault” for a kid feeling disengaged from the class—it is still the teacher’s job to try again to show that student they care. And, according to the students I interviewed, part of that means being willing to push kids and help them even if they have rejected that help before. This can be very frustrating for teachers—they are human, it is difficult work. Even well-intentioned teachers will experience these frustrations, to connect back to the interview excerpt at the beginning of the chapter. Jin weighed in on the perseverance needed from teachers in this regard. When I asked him what he thought teachers did well at Mandela High School he said:

Jin: Every single kid has a chance here. And that unfortunately is to the detriment of the school as a whole cuz the effort and time we put in to just a small group of kids, making sure they don’t slip through the cracks—

Karla: mmm hmmm

Jin: —it takes away from the rest of the school. And a lot of teachers will say you know, we pay too much attention to the kids that’s doing bad, or not doing well, or causing all the problems—you can go back to the squeaky wheel kind of analogy I think that’s the part of Mandela that everybody—the teachers and the students see. Cuz when they leave and they come back and the first thing they tell you [about their new school] is they don’t care, it’s too big, we’re just a number, people don’t know my name, they don’t try to help me, they just move on with their day. So, but that’s also taxing as well.

Karla: Right, comes at a cost.

Jin: Yeah, at a major cost. Whether it’s from continuity of staff and expertise to a stress level that’s unmatched by other schools because even when they [teachers at Mandela]

have preps [non-teaching periods], they take the time to work with the kids. The kid could tear up their room that one period but they'll be right there with the door open for them to come back. So, I mean, for teachers who are not, who didn't anticipate doing that in their teaching, or they didn't envision that, it's a whole (pause) shift in their world. Other people that know this is what we do, it's a lot easier to bear. But that's, and it goes back to it, if you don't take that freedom, if you're not working hard, designing good curriculum, engaging the students, finding very relevant information—you have a blank curriculum, these needy kids—it's tough.

Jin is saying that even when teachers do those things (work hard, engage students, find relevant information), they will still experience those frustrations. The point he made throughout the interview is that teachers who do not come to teaching with a greater sense of purpose tend to not deal as well with the frustrations. In a teacher's ideal world, every student would come to class every day enthusiastic about the work. But this is not reality, and teachers who understand that this is largely due to how the institution is structured can cope with this frustration better rather than holding grudges against individual students. In the next section, I am going to talk more about the kinds of frustrations I saw and heard about from Kurian and Amir.

Teacher Frustrations

In this section, I argue that although Kurian and Amir talked to me about frustrations typical of many teachers (e.g., perceived lack of engagement, lack of respect, feeling like they are not making a difference), their response to these day-to-day frustrations mattered. Rather than being consumed by their own roles as enforcers of institutional power, they were able to consider things from their students' perspectives and maintained the stance that as long as they continued to treat students with respect and tried new things, their work would pay off, even if it

was not immediate. Specifically, Kurian's view that he was there to help students develop critiques of oppressive power structures so they could change them influenced the things he was then frustrated by. It was not lack of control over his students that frustrated him, but rather his perception of students' lack of attention to things that mattered in their lives.

In the introduction to this chapter I talked about being frustrated, even as an observer, that more students were not more engaged on a more consistent basis. This is not to say that the classroom was chaotic at all times and no one was ever engaged—but students also did plenty of talking with their friends about unrelated things, rushed to finish work for other classes, and snuck to use their phones. I definitely had to get used to it and curb the teacher part of me that wanted less noise in the room. Kurian often was pretty even-tempered about it. He often shushed the whole class, or asked for quiet, or called a student's name out—but he rarely ever let it interfere with the flow of his lesson, and he almost never got upset by it. The times I witnessed him lose his patience (raise his voice, stop what he was doing) were when he felt like the content they were working on at that moment was particularly important. In chapter 5, I described a lesson where the students acted out skits that demonstrated various aspects of the Black Codes that were enforced after Reconstruction. The students were engaged—almost every student was watching the actors. Prior to the beginning of the skits, however, was a different story. The following is from my field notes during a 3rd period class:

The students have a sheet with the 13th Amendment written at the top. The first thing is the 13th Amendment and its loophole. There is still more talking than usual when official instruction is going on. Kurian draws their attention to the timeline on the wall and points out the 13th Amendment. It abolishes slavery. What part of the language of the 13th Amendment actually abolishes slavery, he asks. Kurian underlines the beginning clause

and the end of the Amendment (projected on the smart board), and leaves the middle part alone. He points and says, right here is where slavery is abolished.

He asks, so then what should they write for number one? Someone says, it abolished slavery. He writes that on the board, the students write on their papers. The students quiet down a little when they have something to write down, then some of them resumed their side conversations. The students are more talkative than usual.

We already know that slavery was abolished, it's not news, he explains. "The key is in the part that's not underlined." He points at the middle of the written Amendment on the board. That's the loophole. He asks, does anyone know what that means? He is talking over quite a few students. Nobody really answers. He says a loophole is a way to get out of something, or a way around a law. He keeps having to say "shhhh." There's a loophole in this other part of the 13th Amendment. The loophole is if you commit a crime you can be a slave again. Many of the students are still carrying on side conversations.

Kurian raises his voice. "You guys, I want you to listen to this! This is in the constitution TODAY. Slavery is legal if you've been convicted of a crime, you can be made a slave TODAY. That's the catch. That's what we're going to talk about today."

He writes on the board. Kurian's voice is back to normal volume. He says again, this is today, not just 1866. Students have gotten quiet since he emphasized that this is going on today.

Part of Kurian's response was just an accumulation of frustration at the students' lack of attention and the level of side talking. He tried to wait for them to quiet down on their own and settle into class (which they often did), but they took too long. Add to that, however, the fact that he thought this particular point was extremely important for them to know. He needed them to

know that the law in the United States today was still that you could be enslaved legally if you were sent to prison. This was important not only to their upcoming study of mass incarceration but to the rest of the day's lesson about why the Black Codes were in many ways, a return to slavery.

There were a couple of other times when Kurian lost his patience with the class, usually for a similar reason—they were not paying attention to something he felt was important. And generally he expressed himself in a similar manner—his voice raised and his comments were directed towards the whole class (rather than putting a few students on blast); then he quickly returned to business as usual, rather than staying frustrated for an entire class period.

I asked Kurian about what things frustrate him in his day-to-day teaching during our second interview, and also about how he measured impact in terms of his goals as a social justice educator. This is from our talk about that:

Kurian: Um, I think interest from students in the stuff we would talk about. Like to the extent that it became more than just an assignment for my class, like a task to do, but like intellectually they were engaged with it. Um, then I would also, so it cuz like at certain points—there were events outside of school that I'd invite kids to, whether it's protests or teachers for social justice curriculum fair or like kids not really wanting to do that kind of stuff outside of school. Um, yeah and maybe I didn't have a good measure. Maybe it was a misplaced frustration. But that was a feeling I had. And given that that's my whole point of being in the classroom I was like, well this is a waste of my time. Cuz then I started to think. Especially after that other teacher, Richard Hines left, he usually taught the juniors. So I taught the sophomores in social studies and he would have them junior year. So I felt like there was some kinda continuity, like we're both working together for

shared goals so at least it wasn't lost. But then he left and then, I started to feel like I do all this stuff, and it might be good, but it's for 45 minutes once a day, they have six other classes and it just, it just gets washed away. Like it's a drop in an ocean. Like how could I possibly think that what I do for 45 minutes a day would have that kind of impact on the students? So at that point I was like I want to quit, I want to do something else cuz I'm not changing anything. So then I started talking to my friends who were organizers, and I was asking them, like maybe I can—I have a friend, he's a union organizer with the hotel workers union.

Karla: Okay.

Kurian: And I remember talking to him about shadowing him over the summer. Like I wanted to see what that work is like cuz I'm thinking about leaving teaching. And I was seriously considering leaving teaching. (pause) So that was probably my biggest frustration. Feeling like all, cuz I put in a whole lot of work on this stuff, right? Um, feeling like I wasn't making a difference. Yeah. That's my biggest frustration. Now, on a day-to-day basis is I guess you know, a frustration is when I'm unable to connect with students in a way that will really get them invested in the stuff we're talking about. Cuz for the most part right, it has some connection to their lives, right?

Karla: mmm hmm

Kurian: But I mean, some days it just doesn't work. And so obviously I'm not doing it in the most effective way. And a lot of times it's because the students' own personal stuff or whatever, they're just not at a point, at that time on that day where this is gonna connect with, or they're ready to hear it.

Karla: Yeah, right.

Kurian: And like I mean, my 5th period. That's probably been my biggest frustration this year. And they're not bad kids and I feel like they are—they would be interested in this if they had the space in their brain to actually sit and think about it. Cuz they have probably much more important stuff on their mind and they just can't make any room, and I think that's true for school itself. School is just not that big a space in their worldview right? I mean, for a lot of the students in 5th period a lot of them are involved in the streets, that's life for them, right? That's what's important. And so that's a frustration, that I'm not able to find a way around that. Cuz for the most part it works in 3rd period. It works in 2nd period. But then 5th period, I noticed it more this year that it really doesn't work, right. And that's frustrating.

Karla: Yeah.

Kurian: I mean, I do put in the work and I see that it works with other classes, and with this particular class because of the makeup of the class for some reason it's not working. Which means I need to change some stuff, right? And the time that that requires and I having a kid at home, I mean, there's no time to do that. I don't have the time that I used to sit on a Sunday for hours and hours and improve a lesson.

Karla: Right.

Kurian: Maybe over the summer I get to do that now, I have the time to do that. Uh, yeah so a frustration is not being about to connect with certain kids. Oftentimes, in my experience, the kids who are involved in the streets who do have that space often connect the most with what I teach. Or at least they have the most critical view, I've found. Like, it's not a shock to them, the stuff they end up learning in my class, you know

Karla: Yeah.

Kurian: You know, it kinda fits with their experience of the world. Um, yeah so that's frustrating.

This excerpt is long but it reveals a lot not just about Kurian's frustrations but the realities of schooling for many teachers and students. Kurian feels like what he is doing is not enough because many of his students "just can't make any room" regardless of the relevance of the curriculum. This was something that weighed on my mind a lot during my observations as well. I am not sure what a more relevant, engaging curriculum could look like, but it is still not enough. Kurian, at his most cynical moments, felt like what he was doing for just 45 minutes a day was not enough to make a real difference. He did not blame the students, however. His criticisms were of himself; he talked about needing to change what he was doing in order to have a bigger impact on his students. He was also expressing frustrations at the macro level—which is consistent with his curriculum. Kurian talked a lot with his students about why so many people are involved in "the streets" (a euphemism for involvement in gang activity—a big part of his unit on violence in Chicago). His emphasis in class was never on pathologizing the individuals involved, but rather on analyzing the root causes (poverty, unemployment, hyper-segregation). I am saying this to point out the consistency in terms of Kurian's own political beliefs and how that impacted the way he designed and framed his curriculum. Also his beliefs informed the way he perceived the source of some of his daily frustrations with teaching and possibly helped him persevere in the face of these frustrations.

Amir Chappelle also talked to me about how difficult it is (sometimes) to win students' trust, which is a source of frustration for him. He acknowledged that being a Black male teacher helped him in terms of being able to connect with the kids, but it sometimes also creates problems. He told me:

Amir: You know, it takes a while to kind of win their trust.

Karla: mmmm

Amir: Um, so, you know, and then you know, sometimes the way they talk to you, right?

Is like, they talk to you like a guy on the streets you know, because of that experience.

Karla: And are you saying that as like a negative thing?

Amir: It's a negative thing initially. But when you continue to work on em, like you know on MY end I have to be strong and patient.

Karla: Yeah.

Amir: Cuz I know that right off the bat you know, I'm not gonna get that (he snaps his fingers) respect right away. Um, it takes time to build. And so when it's built you know, it's a really good thing.

Karla: mmm hmmm

Amir: I think it's lifelong when it's established.

Karla: Yeah.

Amir: When it's finally established. Sometimes it takes for them (laughs a little) to leave your classroom for it to be established too, right?

As I listened to him talk in the interview I was struck by his position on this—his ideas about being patient and consistent in the hopes that it will pay off eventually. I have worked with teachers who do not seem to agree with this at all. I have seen teachers get so caught up in ensuring that students are being deferential and compliant at all times that it seems to almost consume their interactions with students, but this is probably because those teachers have bought into their roles of enforcing rules and maintaining institutional power at all times. I asked him how he came to that point of view.

Amir: Um, I'm not saying that I'm fully okay with not being respected from the jump.

Karla: Yeah.

Amir: Like you know, I'm conflicted a lot.

Karla: Uh huh.

Amir: You know, because I really want, I mean obviously every person wants that from the jump. You know. Um, and it's taken me years, right, of just saying, having that, building that frame of reference. Knowing that, okay initially it might not be there. But if you're just patient, you know, you can just, you kinda gotta build your count up. Okay, you know that it's gonna eventually turn in the right direction. Cuz you know, as a teacher you have good intentions.

Karla: Mmm hmm. And are you talking about building this count up with individual students?

Amir: Yeah! Like those stories, right, like those times where you know okay, I know when he's a senior you know, it's gonna you know, pan out and he's gonna have the utmost respect right?

Karla: Uh huh

Amir: And you know it may take, maybe at the end of the year you'll have it. Maybe in a month you'll have it.

Karla: Mmm hmm

Amir: But you know eventually, right?

Karla: Yeah.

Amir: And you gotta think long-term. Right, um, and I'm not saying that you know, it's not, it's not total DISrespect at the beginning.

Karla: Right.

. . .

Amir: Um, so, it's frustrating, I am conflicted a lot, you know. But at the end of the day, you know, I'm also patient and I have forward thinking. I think I kind of rest on that, rest my conscience on that, you know what I mean? Cuz like I know it's gonna pay out at the end.

Comparing what Amir said with what Kurian said in the excerpt quoted earlier, what I noticed in common between them is that despite their frustrations, they still took responsibility for acting on these frustrations. Kurian felt like when he is unable to reach students there must be something he can do to present his curriculum in a different way. Amir said despite feeling conflicted he knows that if he continues to be patient eventually it will pay off—even if it is not until the student leaves his room. This ability to be forward thinking rather than get mired in these ever-present frustrations stems from their beliefs about their purpose for teaching in the first place. This connects back to the observations Jin made to me:

Jin: So from what I see, the teachers that have a strong, very progressive personal style—they can weather some of these hardships that other teachers can't. Cuz they know that this is, this is a battle. Our kids are losing, especially in urban society, they're losing. And they need to have as much, and I hate using these war analogies, ammunition to go out in the world, and they can even the playing field. And that's what they're doing, when the kids fight back, they know. I really wish every teacher took a child psychology course and a couple, multiple psychology courses because they don't understand these are still young people and when they do things, don't take it personal.

Karla: Yeah.

Jin: They can curse you out, they can steal your phone but it's like—

Karla: Right.

Jin: —that's a result of society. It's not a result of who they are—

Karla: Right.

Jin: —what society has created in that situation. If I take your phone and make \$100 I can buy some clothes, I can have the power of that money. I curse you out because I'm having a bad day or I don't feel like doing this, or I'm trying to cover up for what I don't know, it's a whole bunch of different reasons. But a lot of teachers take it personal, and they internalize it. The attitude, the stress, it becomes—their teaching becomes less and less and less.

Karla: Uh huh. So you're saying that is also part of teachers that have this more political stance? They can weather even those kind of things a little bit—

Jin: Yes.

Karla: —better. Because they have a better understanding of like where the kids are coming from?

Jin: Yes. And [a better understanding of] what's the purpose of education.

In this section, my argument is that teachers who are critically conscious are frustrated by different aspects of teaching (e.g., they are not as quick to blame students for perceived lack of engagement) and respond to those frustrations in different ways (e.g., they do not write students off, but rather think about ways they can do things differently). Kurian was not preoccupied with needing to control his students (which could quickly lead to burnout, as students resist control and exert their agency), but rather focused on inspiring the minds that will work to create a more just world.

Conclusion

What I hoped to accomplish in this chapter was to talk about the daily happenings that are sources of tension for both students and teachers. While I think Mandela High School is an amazing place—it is still a school. Schools require students to be in control and spend lots of time ensuring that control (Foucault, 1977). This means teachers are still frustrated by students who aren't paying attention in class, students are frustrated by teachers who expect them to sit still and listen all day every day, and teachers are still under immense pressure from the administration and the district to raise test scores (to name a few). Mandela High School, rather than being some sort of utopia, seemed to me to be a place where there were a core group of teachers whose greater sense of purpose helped them navigate these daily frustrations, and the students generally felt like Mandela was a place where they were cared for more than they might be at another school.

Chapter 7

Towards a Liberatory Education: Summary, Discussion, and Implications for Research and Practice

In the findings presented in this paper I have attempted to show how one school, and one teacher in particular, worked to create a space that is critical, participatory, and liberatory and to do so in such a way that students' experiences, opinions, and knowledge were validated. My goal in this research was to get inside the teacher's world and describe the way I experienced his classroom as well as present the views of my focal participants as they were told to me (Emerson, et al., 1995). I was not aiming to evaluate the teacher's teaching nor critique my participants' viewpoints as expressed to me through interviews and informal conversations.

I came to this project because I was frustrated with things I had seen in schools I worked in regarding the ways teacher-student relationships were often so structured in these schools that teachers' interactions were many times solely about enforcing compliance from students. Then, as in the vignette with which I opened Chapter 1, students and teachers alike were frustrated and tensions were high. I wanted to investigate a situation where hopefully there was something more to the way teachers and students interacted, and also to ask those participants if relationships even mattered to them. What I learned from the students I interviewed was a resounding yes, relationships with their teachers were everything to them!

In our current "race to the top" educational climate, students—especially Black students—are often treated as objects: people to be educated rather than people who have voice and agency. As discussed in Chapter 1, conversations around teaching and learning have been reduced to only the things thought to improve standardized test scores—often ways to better teach discrete skills that will be tested. Race to the Top, and its predecessor, No Child Left

Behind, have a laser-like focus on achieving equity in standardized test scores with no discussion of striving for equality in areas like child poverty rates, health care coverage, or school funding—the equality mandate is reserved solely for standardized test scores (Karp, 2004). The tremendous focus on testing and measurable outcomes reduces students to data points and creates classroom climates where teachers feel like the only thing they can spend any time on are those things that will show up on standardized tests. As Wood (2004) explained, “I have experienced firsthand what NCLB leaves behind—and it is the notion that schools have any role aside from preparing our children to take tests” (p. 34). This paper has attempted to explore those other roles, however. One of the questions I came into this research with is, what does it look like when teachers and/or schools are somewhat subversive and do not focus all their teaching energy on raising standardized test scores?

In this chapter I will first summarize my key findings, separated into three main themes: critically conscious teachers, enacting a critical, participatory curriculum, and the negotiation of power and authority in schools. Then I will discuss implications of this research, including lingering questions and finally directions for possible future research.

Summary of Findings

Throughout this entire research process (forming my questions, collecting my data and writing field notes, analyzing, and writing it up) I have tried to be very conscious of my own perspectives—not with the goal of minimizing them but to be aware of how my own ideas about teaching and interacting with students come into play in my research. I tried to be open-minded in my pursuit of exploring the construction of teacher-student relationships in Kurian’s classroom. Indeed, as I spent time in the field I came to realize that for Kurian, building relationships was less about informal, peer-like interactions with students (which was what I

assumed the relationship building would consist of) and more of a deliberate centering of his students' lives in his curriculum. Pursuing the ways my participants made meaning out of their experiences while I was there remained my overarching goal, and I summarize those here, thematically.

Critically conscious teachers. On the day after the grand jury announced the non-indictment of Darren Wilson for the murder of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, being in Kurian's classroom for the discussion of that and related events was a light bulb moment for me. This is the day I made a note to talk to Jin Li, the curriculum coordinator, about his perspective on the differences between teachers who come to teaching with a critical consciousness and those who do not. I realized that Kurian's critical consciousness fundamentally affected the way he organized his class on a daily basis as well as the content of his curriculum.

One of the reasons I wanted to include in-depth narrative interviews is because who teachers are and what they bring with them into the classroom is important (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Kvale, 1996; Seidman, 2013). In talking to Kurian about his life leading up to his decision to become a teacher, it was evident that his own political development was key in informing his decisions regarding curriculum design as well as his views about his students. Kurian started out wanting to be a community organizer; he thought that was going to be the way he worked to change the world. He came to teaching after needing to find a different route to achieve the same goals. Similarly, John (one of the founders of Mandela High School) and I talked about having grown up with parents who were community organizers and expressly not wanting to do those same things we had been around growing up—we still wanted to work in the community, but with young people and in a way where we would have actual jobs with decent pay. From Jin's viewpoint, having this "political bent" (as he put it) before you step into the

classroom makes a big difference. It helps teachers relate to the students in a way that respects their outside lives, and it helps teachers persevere in a tough profession. For Kurian, who teaches a subject that is not tested thus giving him a little more leeway, it also influences the way he designs his curriculum.

The history of how Mandela High School got founded is also relevant. Context is key to ethnographic research. Nothing exists in a vacuum. Mandela exists in a particular time; it comes out of a specific history and was started by individuals with their own histories. What they bring to the space and what they then try to impart on their students matters. I included a brief history of the activism in Lakewood that people either directly involved in or tangential to Mandela's founding were a part of because it helps give a full picture of the context of my research, including my own personal relationship to Mandela.

Enacting a critical, participatory curriculum. Ladson-Billings (2014) and Rolón-Dow (2005) argue that any culturally responsive, caring classroom has to include a critical component. That is, teachers must foster a critique of the way power is (unequally) distributed in our society. Valenzuela (1999) described the need for caring practices that are specific to students from marginalized communities—a kind of care that does not try to erase or minimize students' out of school realities. Kurian's entire curriculum was centered on helping students look critically at their world, and it was enacted in such a way that students' ideas were an integral part of each lesson. Kurian's students shared their ideas, responses, and experiences regularly throughout each class.

Kurian felt like it was mostly through his curriculum that he was able to connect to students. He credited his curriculum as the main reason his students tended to like him. Kurian told me that because of the way different topics were examined in his curriculum (e.g., violence

in Chicago), students came to understand that he was not judging them nor placing blame on them, and this was how he was able to foster relationships with them. The students, in turn, felt like Kurian was one of those teachers who got where they were coming from.

Kurian created many different structures for student participation on a daily basis. The daily share-outs of bell ringers and reflection questions were ways to get student opinions on the topic of the day. During the main part of the lesson Kurian also regularly solicited student opinions or asked students their experience with whatever the topic was. He regularly affirmed student opinions, except when students expressed ideas in direct contrast to things they had talked about (e.g., pushing back on students for saying Black people get arrested for marijuana possession more because they sell it more). In general, Kurian hoped to provide students with a different angle on a topic that was familiar to them and generate critical discussion around that topic.

The negotiation of power and authority. The institution of school is mired in power relationships. Schools, as an institution in a society where power is unequally distributed, are vested in maintaining unequal power relationships, and teachers are often the agents that enforce those relationships. Even teachers who are critical of this still participate in it; the question is how do they negotiate their participation in such a way that students are able to maintain agency and feel like they are being treated in a way that is respectful and caring? I looked at the ways teachers and students at Mandela, and in Kurian's class specifically, navigated those relationships. Based on my observations in Kurian's classroom and my interviews with Kurian and Amir Chappelle, I concluded that they tried to walk a fine line between enforcing school rules (e.g., no cell phones in the classrooms) and avoiding power struggles with students. They felt like they had to satisfy the expectations of the school and district administration of what a

“well-managed” class looks like while giving students as much opportunity as possible to save face in complying with school rules. This did not always work out perfectly, however.

Students told me they did feel like their teachers at Mandela cared about them a great deal. Samantha, one of my focal students, talked on and on about how teachers don’t care, they don’t take into consideration anything kids have going on outside school. Then she added on, “But teachers in Mandela they, teachers in Mandela they really care. Like it’s a lot of teachers in this school that really care about their students.” Based on her comments and other student comments, they felt like it was different at Mandela than at other schools they went to, or than it might be if they were at a different high school. Similar to findings from Nasir, Jones, and McLaughlin (2011), I found that interpersonal connectedness (students feeling like they had good connections with teachers and other staff at Mandela) did not necessarily mean they felt connected to the institution (as measured by attendance and active participation in class, as well as the frustrations Kurian discussed with me regarding a lack of engagement in outside social justice-related things).

Students voiced strong opinions on their desire for teachers to achieve a balancing act in the classroom. They wanted a teacher who was able to be an authority and be laid back. They felt like teachers should be strict, use humor, be open with students about their (the teachers’) lives, and be willing to help students. Students over and over again in interviews told me they felt like their relationships with their teachers were tied to the grades they received in specific classes. While I witnessed plenty of examples of humorous exchanges in Kurian’s class, Kurian did not use humor and personal connections to the extent the students reported other teachers in the building doing so. Kurian said this was partly due to personality differences but also because he

felt like his curriculum was so important that he did not have time to stray too much from his planned lessons during class time.

One of Kurian's biggest frustrations was feeling like he was not making a difference in his students' lives—which for him specifically was about consciousness-raising. He explained to me that he felt like some of his students had so much going on outside of school that regardless of how relevant his curriculum was, some of them just did not have school as a large part of their worldview. That is, they lacked a connection to the institution of school, but they also did not engage consistently and deeply in Kurian's content (e.g., lack of participation in class discussions, not completing the work). Kurian sometimes was visibly frustrated in class when he felt like students were not paying attention to content that was especially important. Whenever I saw him lose patience in class (e.g., stop the lesson to tell students they needed to pay attention), it was always about him saying “you need to know this” rather than him feeling like students were disrespecting his role as the authority in the room by not listening.

Discussion of Findings

Researchers have revisited culturally relevant pedagogy and reiterated the need for teaching practice that includes a critical examination of society's power structures and also sustains students' cultures (Ladson-Billings, 2014; Paris, 2012; Paris & Alim, 2014). This research documents the practices of a teacher who is trying to do those things in his classroom. One aspect of building relationships with students is teachers successfully communicating to students that they care about their lives inside and outside school (Noddings, 1984). For Kurian, this was primarily accomplished by creating and enacting a curriculum that was critical, relevant to students' outside lives, and that drew heavily on students' ideas and experiences. This ethnographic work documents the kind of teaching these researchers have said is necessary.

Whereas most of the research documented instances where schools largely felt like uncaring places and students felt alienated, the students I talked to at Mandela felt like their teachers really cared about them (Lee, 1999; Rolón-Dow, 2005; Valenzuela, 1999). Fisher's (2007) and Antrop-González and DeJesús's (2006) research both document instances where teachers cultivated caring relationships but in a non-traditional context (i.e., not in a traditional public school setting). My research is in dialogue with this existing research in that it focuses on the construction of the kind of teacher-student relationships that the research says is necessary, and in a traditional public school context.

What became clear in my data collection and analysis is how much who Kurian was outside of his classroom mattered. When other researchers have argued that teachers need to care for their students in ways that take into account students' marginalized positions in society (i.e., in ways that are not color blind), they did not talk about how teachers might arrive at a place to be able to do that (Rolón-Dow, 2005; Valenzuela, 1999). Kurian brought a critical consciousness to teaching; that point is key. He was able to foster relationships with his students that were caring, that took into account their position in a racist society, because of his belief system and because he was teaching as his way to participate in a movement for radical social change. He was able to practice the kind of critical caring that Rolón-Dow called for because he brought a critical consciousness to teaching. I am not arguing that being critically conscious prior to becoming a teacher is the only way these critical relationships can happen. But I do think that in order for teachers to address the role of racism and power structures in the lives of their students they must first have a thorough understanding of these structural things themselves.

I did not enter into this project with explicit questions about issues of power, authority, and discipline in schools, but I came to realize that these issues are ever-present, and negotiating

them is part of what goes into constructing teacher-student relationships. One of the things Ferguson (2000) concluded is that the way student behavior is labeled and punished in schools is institutionalized, and the systems are reproduced even among the most well-meaning teachers and school staff. This was true in my findings as well. Kurian tried to mitigate the power differential between him and his students by having a laid back demeanor in class. I observed him try to exert power over students (e.g., threaten repercussions for not listening) very little, generally only in instances where he felt that the class content was very important in that moment, and he needed students to pay more attention. However, the school was still a place where students were expected to follow directions and were punished for not doing so. Kurian was the authority in his classroom; students waited for him to tell them what they were going to do each day. Even though Mandela High School did not feel as oppressive as Rosa Parks Elementary School in Ferguson's work, many of the same elements existed in Mandela (e.g., an in-school suspension room) because, as Ferguson argued, these issues of discipline and punishment are institutionalized in schools. I argue that (a) this is a large contributing factor to why many students did not feel a connection to school, despite telling me they felt like their teachers really cared about them; and (b) issues of power and authority in schools need to be an explicit part of the conversation around what liberatory education looks like.

Implications for Teaching

One looming question that came out of this project for me is what counts as a good education? Who gets to define it? How is it measured? How does a teacher know when he/she has done a good job? Researchers have named high standards and rigorous instruction as an important dimension of culturally responsive teaching (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Cholewa et. al, 2012; Rivera-McCutchen, 2012). What does it look like to have high standards for students? I

continuously questioned how we measure high standards, however. I wonder—high standards to what ends? Is the only acceptable form of high standards teaching the habits and practices thought to foster success in college? This project made me question the assumptions made by educators and education researchers about the definition of high standards for students.

Kurian told me that his goal in teaching was to equip students with tools so they could analyze, critique, and change the world. During my observations it definitely seemed to me that this is what he is trying to do. He told me he often fell short of this goal, as measured by students' lack of desire to participate in things outside of school and their apparent apathy/lack of attention in class. But does this count as setting high standards for students? It depends on how we define the purpose of education. This research points to a need to further conceptualize this question of “education to what ends?” How do we define a good education?

Considering all the ways the institution of school structures teacher-student relationships (as discussed in chapter 6), in order for a liberatory education to be realized in the ways that Kurian expressed to me, there must also be liberatory practices happening for students outside of one or two classes as well as outside of school. Schools are still spaces where many students of color and poor students experience alienation and frustration. Even in a space like Mandela High School where students told me they felt like they had teachers who listened to them, who cared about them, and who understood their lives outside school, I still witnessed a lack of consistent and deep engagement in the class content (e.g., unrelated side conversations during class, not completing all assignments). I believe this to be more about school as an institution versus what was happening at this particular school. I think school staff (at Mandela High School and every other school) need to engage in critical dialogue about the ways school policies and practices reproduce societal inequities.

Another implication of this is that change cannot only take place in school. Most of the students at Mandela High School still lived in under-resourced, hyper-policed communities regardless of Kurian's best efforts to enact a critical curriculum. I do not think this means teachers should just give up because they are fighting an unwinnable fight, however. In order for radical social change to be realized, the fight must happen on many fronts, education being one of them. At the time of this writing, there are organized movements happening locally and globally on many fronts, including organizing against police brutality, for increased minimum wage, and against mass incarceration (to name a few). As idealistic as it sounds, even if the fight for a radically reconstructed society is not won in the schools (or not won at all), critically conscious teachers should still want to be a part of the movement.

Limitations

Qualitative research is not meant to be universally applicable or lead to making generalizations. I am not looking to contribute to a small definition of what good teaching is or looks like. What I am aiming to do is add a story to a body of literature that looks at this phenomenon of teacher-student relationships from a perspective that does not focus on problematic relationships. This does not mean there were no problematic things during my observations; I have done my best as a human instrument who has her own set of biases to paint a full picture—the good and the not so great—of what I saw at Mandela High School during the time I was there. In reality, teaching is complex. I have worked to try and reveal these complexities in a way that moves past a good teacher/bad teacher dichotomy. There is no doubt that the complexity of my role at the school is also a limitation, however. While I was not a complete insider at my research site (e.g., I have never worked with Kurian or at Mandela High School), I do, however, have many connections to the school and the teachers, which made it

difficult for me to see things in the same way a true outsider would. Rather than aim for neutrality, I have instead tried to be transparent about those connections.

Directions for Future Research

Teaching is a practice that is ever evolving and responsive to students, whose needs could change from one day to the next, within a given day, or from student to student on the same day. There is no way to codify good teaching; rather what I hope to do in future research is add to the body of ethnographic research that aims to paint a picture of what practices teachers are engaging in in different contexts (e.g., different grade levels, different subject areas, urban classrooms, rural classrooms, racially integrated and segregated classrooms, students at varying socioeconomic levels). As an ethnographic researcher, I think I have a fine line to walk in terms of not wanting to add to the body of research that describes what is going wrong in classrooms, while investigating and describing my research sites honestly and wholly rather than trying to look for perfection that does not exist.

In the future, I hope to do more ethnographic research in classrooms and see how teachers are interacting with students. I am still interested in how teacher-student relationships are constructed through interactions, and I think this research shows one way, but not the only way. I would like to also do research that focuses on students and follows them throughout the day in order to see how they interact with different teachers. I have had plenty of informal conversations with teachers that reveal that one student can act and react completely different in different classrooms or at different times—it would be interesting to get a more complete picture of a day in the life of a student and have more in-depth conversations with the students about their backgrounds and their perspectives on events that occur within the school day.

Doing extended teacher interviews is something I would like to do more of as well. Conducting narrative interviews with my focal teacher, Kurian Joseph, gave me so much valuable insight in terms of what stories he chose to tell me to frame his background and the way he constructed a somewhat linear story of his life leading up to his choice to become a teacher. Giving teachers a chance to reflect on their practice as well as the different experiences in their lives that they bring to the classroom is such a good compliment to participant-observation. I would love to design studies in the future that look more at the relationship between teacher narratives and classroom practice. Kvale (1996) explained, "There is a move away from obtaining knowledge primarily through external observation . . . towards an understanding by means of conversations with the human beings to be understood" (p. 11). Ethnographic research involves situating the phenomenon of interest in a particular context; part of this context is the teacher's lived experience. We all live storied lives; we experience the world narratively and tell and retell those experiences in stories (Bruner, 1994; Clandinin, 2013; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Dyson & Genishi, 1994; Webster & Mertova, 2007). So it makes sense to use narratives as a methodology for inquiry into people's lived experiences. Narrative inquiry as a methodology is not a novel idea, but I would like to continue to merge it with traditional types of ethnographic data to create a richer data set (e.g., participant-observation of classroom events and teacher meetings, shorter participant interviews, collecting relevant artifacts).

Conclusion

I am still left with questions about what does it look like to care about students in ways that are critical and responsive? How do we know when we, as educators, have done a "good job"? How do we create classrooms and schools that treat students justly, in the hopes that we

can create a more just world? How does the pervasive injustice that our students face outside the classroom impact them while they are in school?

Overall my dissertation attempts to open up the conversation about teaching in ways that include more than just transmitting content to students with the ultimate goals of higher standardized test scores and perceived successful preparation for higher education. In opening up this conversation, I have highlighted what it is that students themselves deem important, and also the ways in which teachers are trying to engage in practices that are responsive to students' cultures, desires, and frustrations. In this way, I have contributed to the research documentation of what classrooms can look like when teachers are guided by more than trying to move students forward on standardized test scores.

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